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The Role of Agency and Identity in the Language Socialization of Iranian EFL Learners during the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Ethnographic Study

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Abstract

In the context of language socialization, second/foreign language (L2) instruction is a crucial context for secondary socialization, especially when it takes place outside the learners' culture of origin. This study explored how Iranian EFL learners socialize through the rules of EFL classes and how gender, parents, and native language affect their language socialization during the COVID-19 pandemic. We focused on two fundamental principles of language socialization (Lee & Bucholtz, 2015): agency and identity. In this ethnographic study, we collected the data by observing two classes in a WhatsApp group, interviewing the learners four times through Skype, asking them to write down their reflections about their class procedure, and writing our reflections about teachers-students interactions. We used Direct Qualitative Content Analysis method to analyze the data. To simplify data classification and interpretation, we utilized the MAXQDA-2020 software. The findings revealed two sub-categories for learners' agency (talent and experience) and three sub-categories for learners' identity (gender, parents, and native language). The results also showed that language socialization is bidirectional, and learners face forms of negotiating, accepting, or rejecting their agency and identity across this socialization process. The learners' L1 and culture influence their opinion about the English language and culture. Whether this effect is negative or positive depends on proficiency level, gender, and social context. Finally, cyberspace provided a suitable context for language socialization, especially during the Covid-19

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pandemic. Findings showed several pedagogical implications for EFL teachers and learners.

Keywords: direct qualitative content analysis, ethnography, language socialization, learners' agency, learners' identity

1. Introduction

It is essential for any community to learn to think, act, and speak like an expert in specific physical, temporal, cultural, and ideological spaces (Garrett, 2020). Through language, humans learn culturally appropriate ways of acting and interacting (James, 2022). Moreover, as the language of everyday interaction within communities of practice develops, Language Socialization (LS) provides a theoretical and methodological framework for understanding this process (Lee & Bucholtz, 2015).

By learning language skills, novices/children become competent and legitimate community members while simultaneously learning linguistic and cultural norms. (Duff, 2020; Ochs & Schieffelin, 2017). Aside from being a means, language is the end of socialization (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1995). Explicitly or implicitly, language socializes newer or younger community members into their beliefs, cultural practices, and socio-linguistic practices (Duff, 2019). In EFL contexts, teachers and students interact within the classroom, where most of the second language (L2) input occurs (Sanal & Ortaçtepe, 2019).

Investigating LS is ordinarily grounded in English-speaking nations, where amateur learners turn to the communities' socially competent individuals within the dialect learning forms and hones (Anderson, 2021; Duff & Anderson, 2015; Jackson, 2020; Shvidko, 2016; Ochs & Schieffelin, 2017). However, limited investigations have probed English-L2 socialization in foreign language settings, specifically concerning learners' social connections and interactions inside the class. Despite the proliferation of research in the LS paradigm over the last 30 years, comparatively little has focused on foreign LS from the learners' perspective. Moreover, there is a dire need to study LS in a context where learners of different proficiency levels are in English institutions (Byon, 2006). Recognizing L2 socialization as a deep-rooted, verbose, non-linear, and multidirectional preparation, LS scholars highlight the esteem of ethnographic approaches (Duff & Anderson, 2015). In ethnography, the researcher tries to discover the beliefs, ideas, values, and people's motivations for a while and how they shape and change (Woods, 2005).

Among members of a family or community, the process of language socialization is vital in identity construction. In traditional theories of socialization, the child was considered a mere receiver of the process, played a passive role, and was required to be guided by society to adapt to that society (Cromdal, 2009). As

active and creative social agents, children produce, construct, and negotiate the identities created by others around them during language socialization. Also, they shape and impact the identities of those they socialize with. As such, this study explores the role of agency and identity in the LS of Iranian EFL learners ethnographically in an English institution during the COVID-19 pandemic in virtual classes (like Skype and WhatsApp) as an opportunity for asynchronous interaction in response to their teachers and peers. Consequently, this study attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. How do Iranian learners socialize through an agency to the rules of the EFL classes?
2. How do external factors (gender, parents, and native language) affect the EFL Iranian learners' identity construction in LS during the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Language Socialization Theory

Ochs and Schieffelin (1984) developed the LS theory by connecting two already established disciplines, namely developmental psycholinguistics, which primarily focuses on language acquisition without considering social and cultural structures, as well as anthropology on child socialization, which stresses the importance of enculturation while overlooking the role language plays in socialization. It has been widely recognized that language acquisition cannot be separated from other kinds of social and cultural acquisition in the LS framework (Piccardo et al., 2022). Through social interactions, sociocultural phenomena are sustained, negotiated, contested, and sometimes modified. Language plays a crucial role in transforming higher cultural systems as well as reproducing them (Ochs, 2002).

Given the fact that the focus of LS research is on developing linguistic and cultural competence through language in context, LS is principally concerned with language use within interactions as a means of developing these skills (Schneider & Jin, 2022; Wang & Jokikokko, 2022). As a result, linguistic and cultural competence is constructed collaboratively, highlighting participant agency (Duff, 2010).

For this study, we employed a definition of second-language socialization discussed by Duff and Talmy (2011) and Duff and Anderson (2015). Duff and

Talmy (2011) argued that language socialization aimed to clarify learning in broader terms, investigating linguistic development and the other knowledge forms learned in and through language. Other knowledge forms include culture, social experience, ideologies, epistemologies, identities, subjectivities, and affect. These forms of knowledge comprise what it suggests to recognize a language and participate in the ever-changing, dynamic communities of practice where language is used. Language is not considered mere morphemes and syntax but is linked innately to usage strategies and social conventions (Neufeld, 2022).

Duff and Anderson (2015) noted that this second language acquisition theory highlighted the transfer between individuals engaged in social interactions. Primarily, this happens within the roles of mentors/experts and newcomers/novices. Despite the significant role of mentors in the socialization of newcomers, this relationship is bidirectional and continually negotiated. Notably, perceived experts are not consistently successful at socializing newcomers, as mentors socialize into communities too. LS research needs to be ethnographic, document changes in language and other social practices, define development in terms of socialization and involve close analysis of rich primary data (Duff & Anderson, 2015).

2.2 Language Socialization as a Bidirectional Process: Novices' Agency

Scholarship on LS has indicated that bidirectionality is a significant feature of individuals' engagement, membership, and belonging. Rather than being a one-sided transaction between an expert and a novice, socialization involves a two-sided interaction between novices and experts (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984). Immature members can shape their development and resist and modify aspects of the social order in which they are embedded (Ochs & Schieffelin, 2017).

Therefore, novices and children not only absorb expert opinions and ways of thinking, feeling, and acting, but they can also choose and organize worldviews, and ways of thinking, to feel and work with which they agree or disagree. This issue is especially proper in L2 socialization settings where learners have previously been associated with at least one network from which they can think about practices and convictions (Duff, 2007).

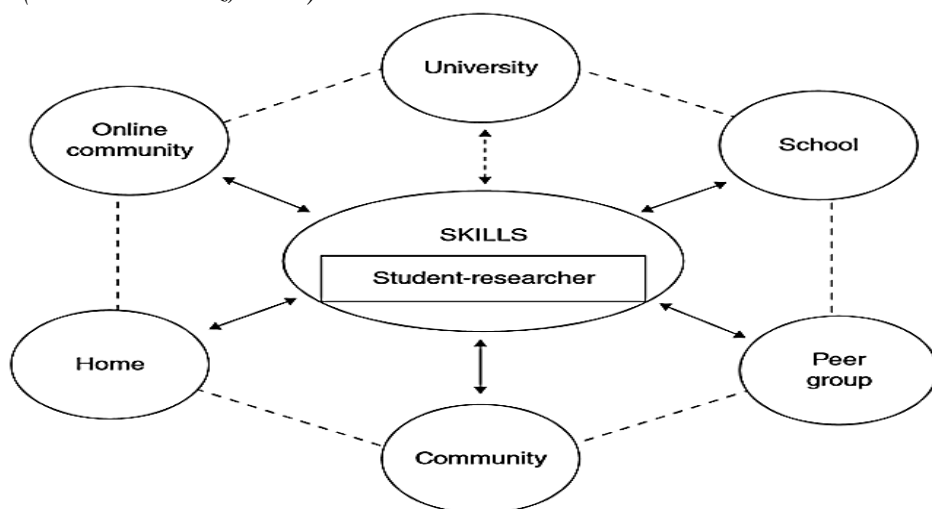
In this way, socialization is a multidirectional process influenced and shaped by experts and novices, and social actors are continuously influenced by and interact with local contexts (Talmy, 2008). Those encountering socialization have the

agency to create new strategies for acting, being, and imagining that do not replicate the collection of social, linguistic, and philosophical practices to which they are subjected (Soltani & Tran, 2022).

Lee and Bucholtz (2015) argue that LS is essential to social life because everyone engages in LS to varying degrees in their lives, no matter their level of expertise or novice status. Participants in LS processes in various domains can be either experts or novices, depending on the context of their interactions with friends and peers, family, and the local community. SKILLS program¹ encourages the youth to bring their diverse forms of expertise into the classroom and to share that knowledge with classmates and teachers. However, in traditional schools, all learners are considered as novices taught by an expert teacher (see, Figure 1).

Figure 1

A Model of Multidirectional LS across Learning Spaces in the SKILLS program (Lee & Bucholtz, 2015)



Although the pioneer studies of LS have emphasized how caregivers and experts socialize children and novices, the initial conceptualizations of LS focus on the contingent, fluid, unpredictable, contested, and bidirectional (or multidirectional) nature of the process. Due to this focus, some people have mistakenly believed that LS emphasizes the reproduction of language as a smoothly occurring process where novices are passive recipients of knowledge from experts to participate functionally

¹ By combining their current linguistic and cultural knowledge with new ways of examining and using language, this program enables youth to become experts during socialization.

in their target communities' practices.

LS happens in multiple ways, primarily through diverse interactions: peer-to-peer, novice-expert, and sometimes self-socialization (Anderson, 2017; Duff & Anderson, 2015). As this knowledge transfer and construction arises, individuals expand their participation in the community and sense of membership (Duff & Anderson, 2015). As members are socialized, they exercise agency to accept or oppose norms and standard conventions of the target community. Moreover, they negotiate the terms of membership and participation within the community and an individual's identity (Duff & Anderson, 2015).

Research on language socialization has highlighted the role of interpersonal relationships and interactions in developing the agency. It shows that social interactions in diverse contexts are related to learners' awareness of agency regarding the linguistic and literacy resources available for identity (re)construction (Jin, 2018). Identity also represents a fundamental driver that shapes learners' self-positionings and endeavors to negotiate the structural constraints of their agency (Hasegawa, 2021). Therefore, a theory of agency in the nexus of identity and social network has emerged from extant research on second-language socialization. It indicates the mediating role of agency and its socioculturally negotiated nature in language socialization (Duff & Doherty, 2018).

2.3 Related Studies

Previous research has investigated different dimensions of LS, such as identity construction (Sang, 2023), L2 pragmatics development (Diao & Maa, 2019), reticence (Sang & Hiver, 2021), and academic discourse socialization (Friedman, 2021). The following section discusses the relevant previous studies.

Using LS theory and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of learning, Amerian and Mehri (2018) examined how L2 essay writers can access the critical reasoning of the academy when taking an essay writing class before, during, and after the course. The learners followed their socialization path according to their individual needs and those of the academic discourse community. Drawing on a second LS theoretical framework, Akuda and Anderson (2018) investigated the contribution made by the university's writing center to the enculturation of three Chinese L2 graduate learners. The findings depicted that they sought writing support to enhance their educational training (See Bankier, 2022; Hafner & Yu, 2020).

In another study, Fujieda (2019) examined the Academic Discourse Socialization (ADS) of one female Japanese undergraduate learner over an academic year in a research seminar course in Tokyo. The results demonstrated that using L1 played a significant role in Nana's ADS as she navigated complex forms of academic written discourse through mediators of her L1 and English. Findings also showed that the participant came to socialize in her specialized community through interacting with peers in the classroom and cultivating her expertise. However, employing an ethnographic approach will aid in this process by enabling researchers to dissect individual methods and practices in close and intimate detail.

Dumlao (2020) examined the oral academic discussion of the learners during the speaking course at one of the public universities in Thailand. The findings showed that ADS is not a predictable, entirely oppressive, unidirectional process of knowledge transmission from the expert to the novice but a complex, locally situated process that involves dynamic negotiations of expertise and identity. Because of the nature of language socialization, it is better to conduct such studies ethnographically to explore it fully over a long time.

In an ethnographic multiple case study, Lixia and Jungyin (2021) examined the socialization of English-major learners in English-related communities through individual networks of practice (INoPs). The results indicated that the socialization of L2 learners mainly occurred through course interactions in educational contexts.

Drawing on second language socialization theory, Li and Gong (2022) explored the intersection between identity transformation and the social network development of three international learners in China. The results illuminated that despite the extensive SA experiences they shared, affordances and constraints varied and contributed to their distinctive socialization paths. Besides, the study argued that agency was neither readily nor equally accessible to all individuals; their capacity to use agentic resources was contingent on the structural and contextual affordances that shaped their options in coping with challenges about language socialization. This study is similar to ours in many aspects; however, the point of divergence is the nature of the participants. We examined the Iranian EFL learners to see the effect of social, cultural, and L1 on their socialization.

As the world has grappled with the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a need to understand how to teach English to learners in this situation. As such, learners are required to socialize in this new condition. Much research is needed to help teachers and learners to consider this difficulty. This study explored the pivotal role of

learners' agency and identity in the socialization of Iranian EFL learners in an English institution during the COVID-19 pandemic through WhatsApp and Skype apps.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants and Setting

The data presented in this study come from a more extensive investigation of LS theory and politeness strategies in an English institute in Sabzevar, Iran, over an academic year (2020-2021). Space constraints limit the analysis to an abbreviated sketch of the two EFL learners' trajectory of LS (see Table 1). In this institute, teachers taught different languages, such as English, French, Turkish, and Spanish. This study focused on the English language. The institutes were not under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, and they were free to choose any curriculum they desired. As such, the teachers taught levels three and four of the *American English File* series as their course books in these two classes.

The study participants were Marjan and Milad (pseudonyms), selected by convenience sampling (Dörnyei, 2007). The reason for choosing these participants is twofold. First, these learners encountered many problems regarding the interference of their L1, differences in culture, and the negative attitude of society towards English. However, they were tremendously interested and had a vast academic background. Second, they have different social statuses, gender, majors, and proficiency level that may influence their identities. Thus, a comprehensive study of these cases is invaluable because it divulges the complex challenges that learners might face in EFL contexts and various factors that affect their identities and agency through LS.

Table 1.

Summary of Participants

	Name	Degree	Major	Gender	Age	English Proficiency Level
1.	Marjan	PhD student	Economics	Female	24	Advance
2.	Milad	BSc students	Civil engineering	Male	19	Intermediate

3.2 *The English Class and its Routine*

There were two tutoring classes that we observed. Each class consisted of two sessions, each lasting one hour and 30 minutes. Both teachers adopted more-or-less systematic procedures because of the institute rules, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic: they would elicit questions around the topic of the reading and ask the learners to answer the question in English, ask them to give a summary of the reading section by sending their voice and then teach the content explicitly, teach grammatical issues with examples and sending the PowerPoint or PDF file in their WhatsApp group; and finally discuss debatable topics in English on Skype.

3.3 *Design*

As the world is struggling with the COVID-19 pandemic, teaching in classrooms like before the pandemic is impossible. The educational systems provide a new context of virtual classes for teaching and learning to solve this problem. Therefore, this study drew on principles and procedures of online ethnography (Reeves et al., 2013) to collect data from online classes. It is a form of ethnography in which researchers gather data from online sources such as texts, chat rooms, forums, and virtual societies (Reeves et al., 2013). Like the traditional model, it collects a thick description of the online life of a community or a culture (Hine, 2000).

3.4 *Procedures*

3.4.1 *Data Collection*

We collected data using participant observation, student journals, semi-structured interviews, and researcher field notes to triangulate findings. The multiplicity of the data corpus will allow us to triangulate results to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

For several ethnographer-researchers, observation is a prolonged personal involvement with those under investigation, such as participation in their lives to the extent that the researcher understands the culture as an insider (Davies, 2008). We observed two EFL classes for about 288 hours. During non-participant observations, we devoted specific attention to understanding how the teachers tried to socialize the learners into the English language and culture.

The student journal is an intellectual exercise in reflexively telling and

explaining one's experiences and observations from a sociological perspective (Wagenaar, 2014). The participants emailed 72 reports to us, and we commented on them, asked further questions, or answered their questions. Thus, the reporting process was very interactive, generating rich data.

Interviews are one of the main instruments in the hands of the ethnographer-researchers, and they try to discover the meanings that individuals ascribe to actions in their cultural worlds (Roulston, 2010). We conducted four interviews at three months intervals through Skype in Persian. Because the participant's mother tongue is Persian, it is easier for them to interview in Persian. As a result, they can explain more about the subject and easily express all their opinions thoroughly regarding those questions. Each interview lasted about 30 to 45 minutes. We audiotaped all the interviews to reflect on them later. After each interview, we transcribed and translated them into English. To elaborate, we first conducted the first interview. Then we analyzed the participants' responses to the first interview questions. After that, we designed the second interview questions based on the responses to the first interview. We did this process for the third and fourth interviews as well. Finally, by triangulating data, we tried to validate our interview questions (Carter et al., 2014).

According to Emerson et al. (2011), field notes should not separate researchers' actions from their observations and explain precisely the social and communicational processes that form people's lives. Hence, we wrote several points about the teacher-student interactions and the teachers' behavior in socializing learners every session to reflect on later (see Table 2).

Table 2.
Summary of the Database

Method	Data collection period (September 2020- May 2021)	Data
1. Participant observation	✓ Ongoing	✓ Two EFL classes ✓ 288 hours ✓ Held in WhatsApp
2. Students' journal	✓ Ongoing ✓ Once per week	✓ Total of 72 reports ✓ Once per week
3. Semi-structured interview	✓ Interview1. Beginning of the academic year ✓ Interview2. After three months	✓ Audiotaped ✓ Skype interviews ✓ Transcribed and translated by the researchers

Method	Data collection period (September 2020- May 2021)	Data
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Interview3. Three months later ✓ Interview4. End of the academic year 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Total of eight interviews ✓ About 30 to 45 minutes
4. Researchers' field-notes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Ongoing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Twice per week ✓ Audiotaped and written

3.4.2 Data Analysis

We utilized the Direct Qualitative Content Analysis (DQCA) method proposed by Mayring (2014). According to this method, we specified the theoretical background and research question. Then we defined the category system, consisting of main categories and sub-categories based on the previous theory and research. After that, we tried to determine a guideline for coding and coding rules. We read the text and memos fully, specified preliminary codes, including anchor examples and coding rules in the MAXQDA software and revised the category and coding guideline after doing 10–50% of the data. We used memos to formulate and record assumptions and hypotheses about relationships or significant findings in the data (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019).

According to Rädiker and Kuckartz (2019), we determined the inter-coder agreement. Two coders did the coding separately, and then their codes were checked based on the category frequencies and contingencies. The first coder specified ten codes and the second coder identified eleven codes. Generally, seven codes were common between these two coders which consisted of learners' experience, agency of the individuals, gender differences, the role of native language, learners' talent, the role of parents, and LS identity construction through language. They also eliminated the less important codes that the coders did not agree upon. Finally, they obtained two main categories based on the relationship between these codes. In Table 3, we reported the inter-coder agreement.

Table 3.

Inter-coder agreement

Codes determined by coder 1	Codes determined by coder 2	Codes common between coder 1 and coder 2
Learners' Experience	Learners' Experience	Learners' Experience

Codes determined by coder 1	Codes determined by coder 2	Codes common between coder 1 and coder 2
Cultural Familiarity	Online Learning	Agency of the Individuals
Agency of the Individuals	Agency of the Individuals	Gender Differences
Gender Differences	Gender Differences	The Role of Native Language
Change in Identity and Behavior	The Role of Native Language	Learners' Talent
The Role of Native Language	Online Learning Self-efficacy	The Role of Parents
Learners' Talent	Language Exposure	LS Identity Construction through Language
Cultural Differences	Learners' Talent	
The Role of Parents	The Role of Parents	
LS Identity Construction through Language	LS Identity Construction through Language	
	Economic Status	

4. Results and Discussion

We answered each research question according to the principles of LS by Lee and Bucholtz (2015). Hence, to simplify the nexus of main categories and sub-categories, we designed Table 4.

Table 4.

A Summary of the Main Categories and Sub-categories of LS

Research Questions	Principles of LS Theory (Lee & Bucholtz, 2015)	The Emerging Sub-categories of the Data
1. The Way of Learners' Socialization	Agency of the Individuals	Learners' Talent
		Learners' Experience
2. The Effect of External Factors on LS	LS Identity Construction through Language	Gender Differences
		The Role of Parents
		The Role of Native Language

4.1 RQ1. Learners' Agency and Language Socialization

This study attempted to discover how Iranian learners socialize through the agency of the rules of the EFL classes. Thus, this research focused on learner agency as a fundamental principle of LS. In this regard, the researchers extracted two sub-categories: the learners' talent and experience.

4.1.1 Learners' Talent

Gagné (2010) defined talent development as “the transformation of outstanding natural abilities (called gifts) into outstanding knowledge and skills (called talents)” (p. 81). Natural abilities are “raw materials” (p. 84) fostered in the developmental process; this process consists of specific activities and investments of money, time, and psychological energy. Moreover, various intrapersonal and environmental catalyst factors control the process (Plucker et al., 2021; Tran, 2022; Zhang & Yuen, 2022).

Milad had a different idea about talent, and he thought some learners have inborn talents in learning a second or additional language like English. He believed that learning the English language is an innate competence developed over the ages and is not influenced by gender, race, and so on. He stated that:

Some people can learn and speak ten live languages, but it is tough for others. I do not think LS depends on gender, race, or superiority; however, age has an impact. Language learning should start at a young age and is not feasible for elders (Interview).

4.1.2 Learners' Experience

Learners' agency is generally found to promote academic performance, cognitive development, and positive learning experiences (see more about a positive experience in Derakhshan, 2022). The agency of EFL learners in English learning was strongly associated with their plans and experiences and set within specific sociocultural contexts (Yang et al., 2020). For example, Marjan argued that:

The first time I wanted to get acquainted with English, I thought writing and grammar were essential skills. But I gradually learned that I could not speak and practically could not use this language through learning these things. So, I changed my mind and tried to use other methods that teach all the skills together. I think the learners should be the agent in their learning and choose the educational strategies based on their abilities, interest, and proficiency level (Student Journal).

This excerpt showed that the learner genetically chose the learning method based on their experience. Regarding these excerpts, socializing in a new language and culture is not unidirectional, i.e., from expert to novice; however, these two camps should negotiate their roles as active agents who diverge from the standardized language use and norms of their target language speakers. This study demonstrated the bidirectional nature of LS, which is in line with the findings in the literature about LS. Besides, the results indicated that the learner's talent and exposure to

language caused them to be an expert in one situation and a novice in another.

Accordingly, the results are consistent with Douglas et al. (2022), who showed that LS is a multidirectional process rather than a linear one throughout a person's lifetime. The findings support Do and Van Mai (2023); Talmy (2008) regarding the issues of power, agency, and contingency.

However, Amerian and Mehri's results (2018) contrasted with the present research findings. They concluded that experts mediated novices regarding the values, principles, and behaviors of the community of practice (unidirectional). However, they ignored the agentic role of the learners as a novice so that they could be experts in other situations.

4.2 RQ2. The Effect of External Factors on Learners' Identity Construction in LS during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Regarding the second research question, we investigated how external factors (gender, parents, and native language) affect the learners' identity construction in LS during the COVID-19 pandemic. We thus embraced another fundamental principle of LS, which is identity construction through language (Lee & Bucholtz, 2015), under which we identified three sub-categories, namely gender difference, the role of parents, and the native language.

4.2.1 Gender Differences

In modern linguistics, gender differences are considered in combination with social status, educational level, situational context, and the changing social situation. (Abdilkadimovna, 2021). Similarly, Marjan stated that shyness and lack of participation of the girls in the class are related to the behavior of family and society:

Boys were very relaxed in class, which was the reason why they talked fluently and intimately with the teacher and peers. However, girls were shy because of society's limitations, so they preferred to be silent. Gender discrimination goes back to how families treat their children. For example, if a stranger came into their home, the girls should not visit the guest. This issue has made the girls less social and less daring to speak. However, in terms of culture, girls have fewer limitations in metropolises. In small cities, girls are usually culturally bounded (Interview).

This excerpt showed vital gender differences in this society and among families.

Because of their parent's and society's expectations, the girls preferred to be silent and spend most of their time at home. So, they have communication difficulties, specifically in another language. Moreover, this extract showed that these limitations are more intense in small cities or villages than in metropolises like Tehran (Province of Iran). "So far, none of the girls in the class have been active or speaking in English, leaving only a series of messages in the group (observation)."

In the observation sessions, the girls participated less in the class discussion. However, they just tried to convey their ideas through messages which showed that online context helps girls to express their opinions without losing their face. In a quantitative study, Korlat et al. (2021) showed that no significant difference existed between both genders while using digital tools during the COVID-19 pandemic. These results indicated that digital tools are a suitable place for learning as gender difference has affected the learning process anymore, and female learners can show their English language abilities without shyness.

4.2.2 *The Role of Parents*

According to Slovaček and Čosić (2020), school and parents are the two pillars a child can count upon during their education. Their collaboration has always been essential and expected. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the learners were required to use their personal computers and internet access. Their parents provided considerable help for their participation in distance learning, such as technical, psychological, and educational support. Milad has pointed out:

The most significant role of my parent was to enroll me in an English language class since I was a child. Also, my father used to tell my sister and me from childhood to speak English even at home and not speak Persian at all, but we did not do that, which unfortunately made me not speak English well. Besides, during the pandemic, my mother helped me a lot with doing homework and learning the lessons (Interview).

This excerpt depicts the parents' role in encouraging or discouraging their children from learning English, and this issue depends on the parents' attitude toward learning the English language. Similarly, Amir et al. (2022) showed that parents have different roles in helping their children during the COVID-19 pandemic, and these roles can positively or negatively affect the learners. This study's findings are congruent with Hapsari (2021).

4.2.3 *The Role of Native Language*

The native language is often a complex feature of the English classroom, and there are several dilemmas concerning whether to use the native language in English classes (Cancino & Ubilla, 2021; Mohamadi et al., 2023). Previous studies depicted that to be successful in school, English language learners needed their native language and culture to be valued (Kosimov, 2022; Markov et al., 2022; Perfecto, 2022).

As we noted during observation and reflected on them later:

The grammar of the Persian language is very different from the English language. This interference has caused some difficulty for learners. As they mentioned, they think in Persian but speak in English, i.e., they just translate literally from Persian into English without using the correct grammar, which is a significant problem. They should have seen so many English movies to fill this gap in their learning. However, they think it is helpful to use the native language in English classes to clarify the confusing parts, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. As these situations make learning English difficult, they think L1 can be helpful (one of the researcher's field note).

Based on this excerpt, L1 interferes with learning L2, and the similarity of L1 and L2 makes the learning processes easier and faster for the learners. Besides, it showed that L1 could be used as a facilitator in English classes. According to Duff (2007), second LS socialization has some commonalities with L1; however, it involves children and adults who already have lots of linguistic and cultural traditions and community associations when encountering new ones.

In contrast with the results of the present study, Nazary (2008) indicated that Iranian university learners are reluctant to use their L1 in an English language situation and reject it totally for better exposure to L2. However, in the present study, the learners argued that since they were acquired and socialized into L1, socialization can help them to learn and socialize into L2.

This study's findings are congruent with Fujieda's (2019) results in that he highlighted the significance of L1 in the learners' socialization as she handled the complex forms of written discourse through both L1 and English. Moreover, they showed that other external factors, like peers, affect the learners' language socialization.

According to the above excerpts, gender, parents, and L1 can affect learners' identity construction in LS during the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, it showed that learning language differs for males and females. Also, parents' viewpoints

toward English impact their learning. Finally, the similarity of L1 has a positive effect on L2 learning. L1 can be used when the learners have problems in understanding. In line with the present study, Duff (2007) indicated the effect of several external factors, such as home, school, university, peer group, and workplace context, on LS. Finally, this study depicted that digital tools influenced the learners' identity in online classes. Generally, learning spaces can affect their identity construction and socialization into a new language and culture, and depending on gender, family, society, and experience, its impact will vary (Consorti & Consorti, 2022; Doherty, 2021) (see Table 4).

Table 4
Coding Framework

Themes and codes	Number of observances
Theme 1: Agency of the Individuals	43
Learners' Talent	25
Learners' Experience	22
Theme 2: LS Identity Construction through Language	35
Gender Differences	20
The Role of Parents	18
The Role of Native Language	15

5. Conclusion

As the concept of learners' agency is relatively new and plays a crucial role in their socialization through language, this study aimed to explore how learners' agency impacts their socialization and how this process shapes their identity. Additionally, we examined the influence of various factors such as parents, first language, and culture on language socialization. Our research specifically delved into the impact of learners' culture on language socialization to demonstrate the inseparable connection between language and culture.

The results provided evidence for learner agency in the socialization process through language. They do not simply follow their target language speaker's norms, but they negotiate their roles as active agents. Their agency is enacted by accepting or rejecting undesirable identities, positions, functions, and normative practices, as opposed to passively admitting them. Therefore, this study demonstrated LS as a bidirectional system, which is beneficial for promoting its inherent characteristics. Furthermore, this study examined the effect of external factors on the LS of learners. These factors affect their identity construction as a significant outcome of

socializing processes during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results also showed that learners' L1 and culture affect their point of view about the English language and culture. Besides, whether L1 and culture have negative or positive effects on socialization in the English language and culture depends on the learners' personality, level of proficiency, language exposure, gender, and experiences (Cenoz & Gorter, 2020). Moreover, this study demonstrated how digital tools provide a significant context for LS, specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic when the learners have no choice in learning.

The present study implies that aside from aiming to grow the research body of language socialization within EFL contexts, the findings of this study contribute to the ongoing curriculum and programming decisions within EFL settings. The other implication is that future researchers can conduct online ethnography where the face to face data collection is not possible. Socializing in a new language and culture cannot happen in a vacuum. Therefore, diverse factors like parents, L1, media, and peers can affect learner identity construction. Hence, this study informs stakeholders to be careful about all the factors that affect learner socialization into a new language and culture. The other implication for the stakeholders is that they should be aware that knowledge transmission is not unidirectional from experts to novices; however, it is bi-multidirectional. Learners are agents in accepting and rejecting that knowledge, and they can utilize their experiences. Another implication is for the material developer and curriculum designers. As language and culture are inseparable, this study tried to inform material developers of this issue and that they should not separate the English language from its culture. Learners do not socialize in the English language unless they acquire its culture.

While this study mainly focused on learners, it would be desirable to include the voices and experiences of teachers. Also, this study calls for future research to investigate how learner agency affects socialization in other contexts like universities and schools where the learner agency is limited. It is crucial to consider that, due to the small sample size, the results need to be interpreted cautiously by the researchers.

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