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Resisting magic waves: ideologies of “English language teaching” in Iranian newspaper advertisements

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Discourse practices play crucial roles in shaping the cultural environment of social events and, therefore, influence how they actually take place. Promotional materials and media advertisements are significant instances of such discourses through which understandings of social practices, including language education, are both reflected and shaped. In this study, I explore the advertisements of Iranian private language teaching institutes appearing in Hamshahri newspaper to uncover ideologies behind them and to examine the subtleties of how the advertisements represent and at the same time reproduce the ideological assumptions regarding “English language teaching” in Iran. A contextual investigation of ideological presuppositions underlying the discourse of these advertisements reveals that they tend to reproduce mystified instrumentalist images of language learning. From a critical view of language education, I discuss this simplistic ideological representation and the obligation of the profession of language education to address it.

Keywords: English teaching ideologies; English in Iran; politics of English teaching; critical discourse studies; advertisement discourse; Iranian newspapers

Introduction

The idea of this study emerged when I found a Farsi newspaper advertisement in which a language teaching institute claimed to be able to teach the English language through what it called the astonishing X method (see [Figure 1](#)). The producers of the advertisement claimed that they taught English without any teacher and without class attendance. Moreover, the method was asserted to operate on learners’ subconscious mind through magic X waves sent to their brain cells.

Having been deeply involved in “English language teaching” (ELT), as a first reaction, I thought it was absurd but soon in a more thoughtful manner, I started to realize that the small advertisement box could potentially contain huge mystifications. To explore such probable mystifications, I have investigated the discourse of newspaper advertisements of private Iranian ELT institutes in an attempt to uncover their underlying assumptions through a critical approach.

ELT in Iran

English has been taught for decades as the primary foreign language in Iranian schools and universities. In the early 1990s, the English learning fever in Iran was reported to be on the rise (Hashemi, [1992](#)). This fever is still continuing to rise as the growing desire to



Figure 1. Advertisement that triggered the study (contacts removed). Translation: English conversation through the astonishing X method – for the first time in Iran – without any teacher or class attendance, in the shortest period of time and with the least expense, at any age, easily speak English through your subconscious mind by the magic X waves sent to your brain cells.

learn English is manifested by the increasing number of private ELT institutes with the major educational purpose of teaching English. English is a required school subject in the official curriculum in years 6 through 12, and in postsecondary education all students are required to pass at least 4, and sometimes up to 10 credit units of English courses. Also English for specific content areas is part of almost all graduate programs (Kiany & Khayyamdar, 2005). Therefore, students frequently hear about the importance of English as an international language of academic knowledge. However, in reality many of these young people wish to learn English only with a vague idea that one day it would be needed for their education or for finding a good job.

Involvement in business relations with other countries is another important reason for learning English in Iran. The knowledge of English that businesspeople seek is mainly for meeting their immediate general communicative needs. Moreover, with the expansion of the Internet and growing international communication, many people are also learning English to be able to access the Internet as well as for tourism and entertainment (Dahmardeh, 2009).

Despite this ongoing focus on English, official ELT programs, both at schools and universities, are failed endeavors due to lack of proper materials, teaching procedures, resources, etc. (Farhady, Sajadi Hezaveh, & Hedayati, 2010; Maftoon, Yazdani Moghaddam, Gholebostan, & Beh-Afarin, 2010). At schools and universities, English language education is predominantly focused on knowledge of structure and vocabulary, with a marginal attention to functional and communicative aspects of language and there is hardly any consideration of language as a sociocultural practice (Jahangard, 2007). Official English textbooks as the main source of learning English are compiled by Iranian ELT academics; they typically include vocabulary lists, short controlled reading texts, comprehension questions, and grammar exercises. Despite several revisions, this general architecture of textbooks has remained unchanged in the past 25 years (Dahmardeh, 2009; Jahangard, 2007).

Although ELT has been growing as an academic discipline in Iranian universities, the academic trends hardly find their way into Iranian schools. Schoolteachers are, therefore, largely detached from the academic contexts and practices of ELT (Farhady et al., 2010). Moreover, schoolteachers are hardly satisfied with their careers and, therefore, they tend to not be greatly committed to their teaching as an educational practice, as such.

Postsecondary English teachers, although normally holding graduate degrees in ELT, basically continue the same path of schoolteachers. Not surprisingly, then, the major purpose served by the widespread grammar teaching, vocabulary memorization, and sentence translation practices is to help high school students through the national university entrance exam and to let university students merely pass their courses (Maftoon et al., 2010).

Private ELT institutes have, therefore, been increasingly popular, especially for the past two decades. They are considered as the right path to English. With more people referring to English academic materials, more people accessing the Internet, and more people traveling abroad, or migrating, English has become increasingly demanded as a necessary foreign language. Consequently, institutes have mushroomed around the country to assume the role of the major ELT institutions in Iran (Dahmardeh, 2009). These private institutes are mainly run by people whose major qualification is the ability to speak perfect English. Teachers, either with academic training in ELT or with merely relying on short-term teacher training courses, usually follow the procedures strictly preplanned by managers and supervisors. Teaching materials in these private institutes are almost always imported from English-speaking countries (Mirhosseini, 2009).

A “critical discourse study”

The present study is theoretically founded on the approach of “critical discourse studies” in light of the emerging critical studies of “context” (van Dijk, 2004a, 2004b, 2009). Critical approaches to discourse studies are aimed at demystifying ideological underpinnings of discourse and uncovering relations of power and control underlying discursive practices. A focal aspect of such approaches is the investigation of media discourse including advertisements. Media, in general, and advertisements, in particular, are major discourses dealt with in many landmark works in discourse studies (e.g. Fairclough, 1989). Moreover, there have been many explorations specifically focusing on various facets of the discourse of advertisements (e.g. Cook, 2001; Goddard, 1998).

As a critical discourse study, this research considers the ELT context of Iran and attempts to explore the underlying ideology of the discourse of the advertisements produced by language teaching institutes in such a context. Ideologies as implicit socially shared belief systems are fundamental social understandings that shape the basis of social representations and consequently regulate social attitudes and practices (van Dijk, 2001, 2004b). As taken for granted basic belief frameworks embedded in discourse, ideologies shape the ultimate basis of discourse practices and social representations (Fairclough, 1989; van Dijk, 1995). Therefore, discourses, including the discourse of advertisements, can hardly be treated as neutral announcements innocently providing information to their audience.

Repeated encounters with specific discourses lead to generalizations that reproduce ideologies (van Dijk, 2004b). Discursive situations are shaped in a way that, to understand the discourse, interpreters would have to take certain assumptions as given (Fairclough, 1989). People derive embedded ideological assumptions “from the repetitive ‘discourse contexts’ into which they are born and involved” (Jager, 2001, p. 33) and, when “naturalized,” these assumptions acquire the status of stabilized fundamental social representations, that is, reproduced ideologies (Fairclough, 1989; van Dijk, 2004b). In a

dialectic relationship, these ideologies in turn appear in later discursive practices (Fairclough, 2001).

Despite the focus of discourse studies on advertisement discourse (e.g. Cook, 2001) and despite the increasing attention paid to such studies in Iran (e. g. Amouzadeh, 2003), the specific subgenre of the advertisements produced by language schools has not been investigated in Iran. In other contexts, the only study of the discourse of ELT advertisements that I am aware of is Chang's (2004) research on "ideologies of English teaching in Taiwan," which investigates ELT ideologies in a corpus of advertising materials produced by Taiwanese language schools and discusses the need for awareness of these ideologies. In a similar attempt, the present exploration of language institutes' advertisements tries to revisit the sociocultural context of ELT in Iran.

The study

Uncovering the assumptions reflected in a public ELT discourse arena such as print media may provide evidence for a more profound understanding of ELT in the particular sociocultural context of Iran and, therefore, more broadly in the wider context of "a world of diversities" (Mirhosseini, 2008). Theoretically founded on critical discourse studies and critical context studies (van Dijk, 2004a, 2004b, 2009), this research explores the underlying ideology of the discourse of Iranian language institutes' advertisements (van Dijk, 2001). The exploration could be viewed as a call for revisiting ideological assumptions of an apparent commercialized foreign language education.

Data

With the massive expansion of ELT in Iran, learners of English have been increasingly bombarded with language teaching institutes' promotional materials. In this research, advertisements of foreign language teaching institutes appearing in Hamshahri newspaper are investigated as representatives of such promotional materials. The Tehran-based daily, once the most largely circulated national newspaper, is owned by Tehran municipality and has been appearing for 22 years now. Not a highbrow paper, and aimed at the general public, the newspaper contains news and reports on a variety of topics including politics, culture, economy, sports, etc. The paper size is 35 cm × 50 cm, and daily issues usually include 24–32 pages. Hamshahri contains a large body of advertisements covering almost a third of the paper. Moreover, an appendix specifically aimed at publishing different types of advertisements appears with each issue of the newspaper. The appendix, half the size of the paper itself, contains up to 200 pages of various classified advertisements.

This large amount of advertisements, the largest among Iranian newspapers, is the reason why I chose Hamshahri as the source of data. The section allocated to advertising educational institutes in this appendix includes a subsection on language teaching that covers approximately one page of each issue. In the advertisements in this section, foreign language teaching schools promote their institutes by introducing their activities and providing contact information. The bulk of 65 issues of Hamshahri, collected over three months, contained 54 advertisement items (such as Figure 2). Most of the items appeared in several issues and a number of them appeared in almost all of the 65 issues. This collection of 54 advertisements produced by language schools and institutes is the body of data explored in this study.

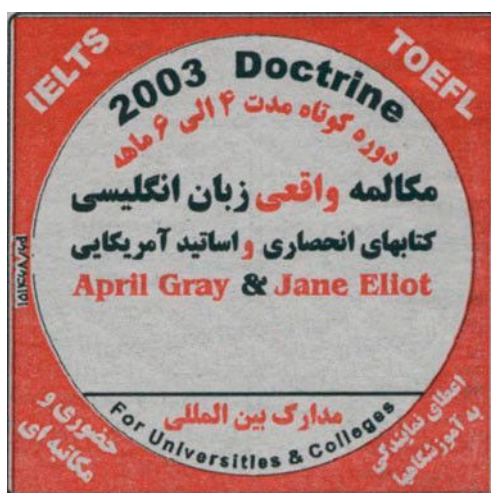


Figure 2. Sample advertisement item (contacts removed). Translation: Short-term course of 4–6 months – Real English conversation. Exclusive books, American instructors, International certificates.

Framework and procedure

With a consideration of the crucial role of context in critical discourse studies, particularly reflected in van Dijk’s (2004a, 2009) discussion of “critical context studies,” I investigate the discourse of these advertisements in the light of three major contextual dynamics that shape the structure of the local context of their appearance: first, the advertisements ought to be projecting positive images, without which advertisements hardly function in a meaningful way. This function, then, is a major contextual dynamic, since without it the advertisements would not be produced at all (van Dijk, 2004a). Second, the status of the producers of the advertisement as experts and “knowers,” is another major dynamic. The “expert” status of people who manage the language schools fundamentally determines the discursive structure of their advertisements as promotional products. Third, potential learners of English, as clients of the schools, despite their diversity, have one commonality: they are most probably not systematically knowledgeable or experienced in language education. Consequently, as far as English learning is concerned, they naturally tend to “listen to” language school managers as expected experts. This audience position of trust and reliance, influencing the discursive strategies of the advertisers, is another major contextual dynamic.

In such a promotional discursive context, a major strategy of covertly exposing the audience of discourse to specific beliefs is to embed the ideas as taken for granted and presupposed assumptions. Propositions as the visible part of language are just a small part of the iceberg of the advertisement discourse, and most other information that could be presupposed, remains implicit (van Dijk, 2004b). This is a powerful way to impose ideological beliefs. The audience are so placed in the discursive context (only the tip of the iceberg, of course) that they have to take presupposed assumptions for granted in order to make sense of the discourse (Fairclough, 1989).

In the particular triangular context of production and interpretation of these advertisements, the nonexpert audience would expect the supposed experts to be

announcing their positive attributes. On the other hand, to make sense of the advertisements as necessarily positive representers of the advertisers, the audience need to take certain presupposed values for granted. Rooted in the professional ELT ideologies, these presuppositions project certain representations of the social act of ELT. Through repeated appearance in discourse, these implicit presupposed conceptions are reproduced as naturalized beliefs (van Dijk, 1995, 2004b). Explicit description of these taken for granted notions might, therefore, reveal underlying understandings and constructed belief frameworks.

Findings and discussion

The 54 advertisement items were examined in search of promotional elements and strategies employed by language teaching institutes. Several general features of the discourse of advertising, especially those expressed through lexical items, are widely portrayed in these advertisements. Frequently encountered are strategies such as highlighting the low price of services, offering discounts to specific groups of clients, hyperbole, etc. However, what this research is particularly concerned with is discursive elements with specific ideological significance for ELT.

The investigation of the advertisements uncovered seven major categories of specifically ELT-related promotional themes, each of which relies on specific presuppositions that the audience need to take for granted in this context (numbers show the rounded off percentage of the advertisement items that exploited each particular theme): proficiency certificates (81%); “mokalemeh” (focus on oral language) (46%); short-term learning (40%); guarantee (33%); claim of best practice (24%); “native-speakerism” (24%); and specific purpose courses (20%).

Proficiency certificates

ELT institutes frequently announce in their advertisements that upon the completion of their courses learners would be awarded certificates, sometimes simply pointing out that certificates would be awarded without specifying the certificates and sometimes mentioning recognized institutions on behalf of which certificates are granted. Tests of English proficiency form a major category of certificates mentioned in the advertisements and language schools sometimes emphasize threshold scores on these tests required by academic institutions, and the audience are assured that they would achieve the required score:

- گواهی نامهٔ مربوطه اعطاء می شود (The related certificate will be awarded)
- با اعطاء مدرک معتبر بین المللی (Awarding internationally valid certificates)
- با ارائهٔ مدرک بین المللی از دانشگاه کمبریج (Awarding international certificates from Cambridge University)
- Toefl ۵۵۰ به بالا (Toefl 550 and above)
- IELTS \geq 7

In the triangular context of function, production, and interpretation of these advertisements, highlighting certificates may be taken as an indication of the idea that, if the presenters of the advertisements as experts in the field are emphasizing the importance of proficiency tests, then, scoring tests must be an important part of language learning. This

taken-for-granted presupposition behind the promotional discourse of the advertisements, exploited by more than 81% of them, reproduces the assumption that “certificates can be trusted evidence of knowing the language.” The concern here is that equating language learning with certificates reduces understandings of language learning to the decontextualized type of language reflected in proficiency tests. Such tests might arguably represent some measures of learners’ achievement in learning the foreign language but from a “critical language testing” point of view (Shohamy, 1998) assessment instruments can distract teaching and even act as control mechanisms through the “imperialism of international tests” (Khan, 2009).

The issue that may be raised here is what it means “to know” a language. Language institutes may be able to help people receive certificates that may be essential to pursue graduate education or to deal with various gate-keeping situations in professional involvements. However, it could hardly be considered the same as helping them learn and explore language with its social and political aspects. The institutes could be called certificate institutes or International English Language Testing System (IELTS)/Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) schools but “teaching test taking” under the name of “language teaching” would camouflage the true sociopolitical nature of language with tests and certificates. Assertions like the following seem to indicate that some ELT institutes direct their entire enterprise at achieving certain scores on proficiency tests:

- برگزاری آزمون آزمایشی (Holding preparatory test sessions)
- تخمین قوی نمره IELTS (Exact estimation of IELTS scores)
- راه های کنترل زمان (Strategies of time management)
- Toefl – مجموعه سوالات دوره های اخیر (Toefl – A collection of recent tests)

The need for scores and certificates in dealing with gatekeepers is one matter, and believing in them as evidence of knowing a language is a very different one. If the latter notion prevails, the dominance of gatekeepers over educational practices may fortify obscured utilitarian images of language and may subtly promote exploitations of people in ways too significant to be ignored, as discussed in the concluding section of this article.

“Mokalemeh”

Traditionally, ELT in Iran has been based on explicit grammar instruction and memorizing vocabulary along with Farsi equivalents (Hashemi, 1992). After decades of failure (Farhady et al., 2010; Maftoon et al., 2010) and as a reaction to grammar based procedures, more communicative-oriented approaches started to appear in the context of Iranian ELT. Therefore, the traditional practice was called grammar method, and communicative teaching was labeled the conversation method – or simply conversation (mokalemeh). Since more than a decade ago, then, mokalemeh has been employed to mean no explicit grammar rules and no out-of-context vocabulary. It gradually became an equivalent for good English teaching:

- کارگاه مکالمه (Mokalemeh workshop)
- مرکز تخصصی مکالمه (Specialized mokalemeh center)
- مکالمه تضمینی (Guaranteed mokalemeh)

This conception of mokaleme is one of the most frequently (mis)used promotional elements in ELT institutes' advertisements, exploited by more than 46% of them (see Figure 3). The so-called grammar method generally tended to focus on written language. As a result, mokaleme, which was supposed to deviate from the traditional practice, focused on oral language. That is why some foreign language teaching institutes try to assure their audience of the oral-only nature of their courses:

• مکالمه محض بدون گرامر و کتاب (Pure mokaleme, without grammar and books)

In the triangular function–producer–audience context of the advertisements, potential English learners are not likely to have a clear idea of what the vague notion of mokaleme involves beyond viewing it as good teaching. They do know, though, that the Farsi word mokaleme means “oral” and not “written.” The semantic notion of nonwritten, then, accompanies the word mokaleme. Expecting a positive self-representation by the expert advertisement producers, a presupposed conception needs to be taken for granted: “good language teaching focuses on oral language.”

Public perceptions are, therefore, distracted from the fact that language learning is not limited to oral communication ability (McLaughlin, 1992) and that literacy is an important aspect of language learning (Hammond & MacKen-Horarik, 1999). Moreover, the belief in pure mokaleme as a separable skill is rooted in a fragmentationist conception of learning (Fasheh, 2000). Such a notion even hardly serves the very purpose of gaining instrumentalist language proficiency, since the ability to use oral language is unlikely to be attained without reference to and reliance on written language.

Short-term learning

A major issue on which the advertisements rely is the length of the courses offered by language schools. More than 40% of the advertisement items under investigation use the notion of “short-term.” Announcements like short-term courses and hyperbolic expressions like in the shortest period of time claim that the institutes are able to help learners learn English in a short period of time. What the advertisers mean by short is to be found out in advertisements explicitly indicating the length of their courses:



Figure 3. Sample advertisement item (contacts removed). Translation: Mokaleme (conversation).

- تدم در ۲ ماه (In a period of 2 months)
- ۴ ماهه انگلیسی صحبت کنید (Speak English in 4 months)
- ۳ تا ۶ ماهه (In 3 to 6 months)
- تدم متاوک فدور ۴ الی ۶ ماهه (Crash-course in 4 to 6 months)
- فقط در سه ترم (In three terms only)

In the advertisements under investigation in some cases even periods of less than two months are referred to. Some advertisements specify the number of sessions it would take before learners can speak English. Others claim to offer exactly timed courses with slight differences of length as if it were possible to precisely determine different types and levels of foreign language learning in terms of their time span (see [Figure 4](#)):

- ۴۰ روزه (In 40 days)
- ۱۵ تا ۲۰ جلسه (In 15 to 20 sessions)
- ۳۵ جلسه مکالمه تضمینی (Guaranteed conversation in 35 sessions)
- مدرسف ۱ و ۲ ماهه (Crash-courses in 1 month and 2 months)
- ۱، ۲، ۴، ۶، و ۱۱ ماهه (In 1, 2, 4, 6, and 11 months)

The ideological assumption reproduced by these advertisements about the time required for learning English as a foreign language appears to be simply reproducing the myth that language learning occurs quickly and easily (Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000; McLaughlin, 1992). Various time spans have been proposed as the required time for attaining different levels of proficiency in a foreign language, with the shortest estimation being two years and other estimations ranging from 3 to 7 and even up to 10 years (Collier, 1989; Hakuta et al., 2000). Nonetheless, for the audience of these advertisements, if the presenters of the advertisements – as knowers in the field – are emphasizing the short period of their courses, taking a short time must be a positive aspect of language learning. The presupposed belief reproduced here is that “it is possible to learn English as a foreign language in a few months” and the shorter the period the better. In such a discursive



Figure 4. Sample advertisement item (contacts removed). Translation: Guaranteed – English conversation – 1, 2, 4, 6, and 11 months Teaching all languages, Everywhere – Interview, Business, Travel.

context, with the above specified short periods, long-term planning is not expected to be too long:

• طول در ۹ ماه با برنامه ریزی طولانی مدت (Long-term planning for 9 months)

It might be possible to cram grammar rules and vocabulary items or to practise test taking strategies in a few months but language learning is all but impossible to happen in a few months even with the simplistic instrumental purposes, let alone with considering social, political, cultural, and even real personal dimensions. The ideological assumption that is being reproduced is that language, bereft of its social and political load, is a simple enough process that involves transferring a specified body of knowledge to the minds of learners and absorbed by them in a few months.

Guarantee

On the basis of the strictly test-oriented mentality depicted above, language teaching institutes in their advertisements not only emphasize their ability to help their clients succeed on proficiency tests, but also they can go on to claim guaranteeing the success of their learners (customers/consumers) in learning English, that is, reaching a certain score level on a test of proficiency (Figure 4). Awkward hyperbolic statements like the last one below are sometimes found in the advertisements, as institutes strive to make known their ability in guaranteeing the outcome of their courses:

- فرم سبک ن میضد ۷ در IELTS فنمر و ۶۰۰ در TOEFL
(Guaranteed attainment of 7 on IELTS and 600 on TOEFL)
- با تضمین کتبی (Written guarantee)
- ۱۰۰٪ تضمینی (100 % guaranteed)
- واقعا تضمینی (Really guaranteed)
- فوق تضمینی (Super-guaranteed)

“Guarantee” as a term borrowed from market discourse and appearing in more than 33% of the advertisements under investigation would encourage the audience in the triangular context of these advertisements to presuppose that “language learning is a specifically delineated process.” On the other hand, guarantee is based on the taken for granted underlying assumption that the specified knowledge of language can be transmitted to learners in prespecified steps and over a predetermined period of time. Such an imposed presupposition and reproduced belief are mystifying ELT by ignoring the fact that with all the various personal and contextual dynamics contributing to learning a foreign language (Kent, 1997; McLaughlin, 1992), promising specific outcomes of the process of language education is almost impossible, let alone offering written guarantee. The following two items appear to amount to direct attempts at perplexing the audience, since perfect knowledge of language can hardly be defined and conversation is far from an ability to be guaranteed:

- فراگیری کامل زبان (Perfect acquisition of the language)
- مکالمه تضمینی (Guaranteed conversation)

Language schools may be able to guarantee the attainment of certain score levels on particular tests, and this is perhaps what many of their clients state as their need. However,

ELT professionals as educators need to think about possible ways of increasing awareness about what language could involve as a sociopolitical construct. It is not easily justifiable for the ELT profession as an educational endeavor to ignore these misrepresentations as simply prudent marketing.

Claim of best practice

Another major theme in ELT institutes' newspaper advertisements, appearing in 24% of them, is their references to teaching methods and course books that they employ. Language schools repeatedly claim the possession of new or exclusive methods of teaching English. However, since there is no clear indication of what the methods could refer to and what they might involve, the audience are left with blurred images of the institutes' teaching practices:

- با متد دیداری شنیداری گفتاری (Visual-audio-conversational method)
- با متد جدید آموزشی – متد شبیه سازی (New teaching method – Simulation method)
- شبیه سازی محیط (Environment simulation)
- روش انحصاری منطق تصویری PLS (Exclusive PLS visual logic method)

In addition to teaching methods, popular ELT course books are also cited in these advertisements. They seem to be functioning as indicators of high quality and reliable teaching. Course books, as teaching materials, are sometimes referred to as systems. Going beyond signifying outstanding materials, the word is aimed at portraying supposedly multifaceted, delicately designed, and prestigious teaching practices. What exactly a system is and why textbooks are called systems are again left to puzzle the potential learners of English and attract them to language institutes:

- New Interchange
- “How Do You do?” English CDs
- Magic English
- American New Interchange

- با استفاده از سیستم New Interchange و American Headway (Applying American Headway and New Interchange systems)
- کتاب های انحصاری (Exclusive books)
- از مدتفاسا ابده ۱ کتاب (Application of 15 books)

The necessary presupposition for meaningful interpretation of these claims in the function–producer–audience context of these advertisements is that “for successful learning, specific methods and books must be used.” However, the concept of best method as well as the so-called communicative teaching approach underlying many of these famous course books need to be challenged and questioned (Chang, 2004; McKay, 2003; Pennycook, 1989). The unchallenged reliance on these materials as innocent and neutral international teaching sources would reproduce a view of language as a merely instrumental asocial set of skills, rather than a sociopolitical practice of constructing meanings.

“Native-speakerism”

ELT institutes in some of their advertisements rely on their teachers’ being native speakers of English, being originally from an English speaking country, or being a graduate of universities in such a country. Some advertisements put the names of their foreign instructors in the advertisements and the names themselves tell the audience that the instructors are foreign people. When no country is named, ELT institutes simply employ the word native. This may, among other things, reflect a trace of decades of a heavy presence of foreign nationals in Iran. Many teachers of English before the revolution in 1979 were American and British citizens, recognized as the right people for teaching their own language:

- با استاد بومی (Native instructor)
- توسط فارغ التحصیل از دانشگاه لندن (By a London University graduate)
- اساتید آمریکایی (American instructors)
- اساتید آمریکایی الاصل (Originally American instructors)
- اساتید native (Native instructors)
- جلسه مصاحبه با استاد London از native

(Interview sessions with a native instructor from London)

- Kevin and Guys
- April Gray and Jane Eliot
- With Kevin and Adulia

Another aspect of “native-speakerism,” as Holliday (2006) calls it, is the announcement of the ability of language schools to help learners acquire the so-called native accent of particular countries. In the context of appearance and interpretation of the advertisements, in order to interpret the reference to foreign teachers as indicators of positive attributes of language schools, the audience should necessarily rely on the presupposition that when one learns English “it is ideal to acquire a specific accent from a teacher who is a native speaker of English.” Not unexpectedly, there is no indication in the advertisements to invite the audience to wonder if there is any unified accent called the British (or American) accent, and if there is, is it possible or necessary to acquire it?

- لهجه British (British accent)
- تلفظ بومی آمریکایی (Native American accent)
- تلفظ بومی (Native accent)
- لهجه اصلی (Original accent)

Native-speakerism is evident in 24% of the advertisements. The attention of the audience is, therefore, distracted from the consideration that ELT goes far beyond native language skills; that native speakers of English are not necessarily qualified language teachers (Tang, 1997); that increasing attention is being paid to teachers who are nonnative foreign language speakers (Chang, 2004); and that with the emergence of the concept of “world Englishes” (Jenkins, 2006) adhering to the so-called native norms must be critically questioned. The assumption subtly reproduced here is one of the most socioculturally loaded aspects of the ideology reproduced through these advertisements, since it paves the way for a sociocultural consumerist orientation.

Specific purpose courses

Language schools tend to further mystify learning English as a foreign language by categorizing different specific communicative purposes as if they were distinct types of languages. However, it is not easy to distinguish between foreign language needs of businessmen and companies as different purposes:

- ان راجتہ فزبو، ان رسافم، شرکت ها (Specially for businessmen travelers, companies)
- دوره های تخصصی مکالمات بازرگانی (Specialized business conversation courses)
- به حاصم، ری اتج، مسافرت (Interview, business, traveling)

An especially significant issue related to this particular aspect of advertising English courses, as exemplified in the last excerpt above, is mentioning foreign embassy interviews alongside other allegedly special communicative needs like English for tourists or businessmen (see [Figure 4](#)). Language schools claim to offer special courses aimed at preparing prospective emigrants for foreign embassy interviews. In the first two extracts which follow, taking part in an interview session is represented as a particular language need requiring a distinct specific course of English:

- به حاصم یاه دور، ری اتج، و توریستی فشرده (Interview, business, and tourism crash courses)
- درم زور، ی ترسافم، به حاصم، ترافس، تخصصی (Daily, traveling, interview, specialized)
- ویژه مهاجران و وزارت کار (Specifically for emigrants and for labor ministry)

The requirements of learners of English as a foreign language can hardly be determined as specifically as the producers of these advertisements are claiming to do. Real language requirements are far from the over-categorizations represented in these advertisements. However, in the context of production and interpretation of these advertisements what follows the notion of specific purposes, exploited by more than 20% of the advertisements under investigation, is that “the more precisely the specific purposes are categorized, the higher the quality of teaching.” Questioning utilitarian perceptions of language and considering its socially and culturally embedded nature (Pennycook, 1994) rather than being concerned with mere communication, one may hardly find it meaningful to overdivide English into all these subareas.

Even the once-accepted view of specific purposes has been challenged and concerns have been raised about “over-preoccupation with writing ‘special’ materials” (Nelson, 2000, p. 126) with regard to areas generally known as English for specific purposes. More in this alternative line, there have been attempts at practising more contextualized and critical approaches to the education of English in different disciplinary areas in Iran. Such alternative practices may promise new possibilities for ELT in content areas (Mirhosseini, 2007) and create hopes for resisting the fragmentationist view of knowledge and learning (Fasheh, 2000) reflected in the overreliance on specificity in these advertisements.

Conclusion

In the triangular context of function, production, and interpretation of the advertisements under investigation, a complex ideology of ELT emerges that, upon repeated encounters, becomes naturalized and influences the public opinion about what language education

involves. This ideological framework can, therefore, manipulate the practice of ELT. The assumptions presupposed by these advertisements tend to reproduce the belief in:

- Certificates as trusted evidence of knowing English
- Oral communication as the primary skill to learn
- The possibility of learning English in a few months
- Learning English as a unified prespecified process
- The possibility of devising specific best practices
- Native teachers and native-like proficiency as ideals
- Language needs as different specific purposes.

As witnessed by the references to the ELT and applied linguistics literature cited in the discussion section, the seven aspects of this ideology are controversial. Many of the simplistic aspects of these ideological assumptions appear to have already been dismissed and even radical critical approaches are gaining momentum against such mystified conceptions. Therefore, I refer to my discussion of the ideological underpinnings of the advertisements to raise some concerns about the current mainstream ideological context of ELT in Iran that probably applies to other contexts as well.

If the ELT profession is aware of these mystifications as mystifications, the challenge is why the discourse context – at least as far as the advertisements under investigation reflect – is not informed by this awareness. A possible reason may be that more recent theoretical understandings have not found their way to the widespread ELT practice because of confinement to academic settings. A question that remains to be addressed, then, is about what makes academic ELT research and education confine itself to an isolated academic discipline and to distance itself from real life ELT. This might be considered as an indication of the concern that the research trends and research–practice connections in the field need to change to generate more contextually rooted understandings of language education.

Considering the crucial ideology-reproducing and practice-shaping function of discourse (Fairclough, 1989; Jager, 2001; van Dijk, 2004b), it would be naive to ignore the assumptions like the ones reflected in this study as simple commercial strategies. Regardless of the question of the advertisers being aware or unaware of the assumptions hidden in their advertisements, the ideological reproducing function of the advertisements is fully at work, since repetitive discursive practices in which people are involved reproduces certain assumptions that through time become naturalized and shape people's fundamental beliefs (Jager, 2001; van Dijk, 2004b). These beliefs resurface as reproduced ideologies that shape actual social practices.

It would, therefore, be necessary to view the discourse of promotional materials as an influential part of the real context of ELT. Accordingly, with a commitment to change, it is necessary and significant – though demanding and challenging – to transform the general commercialized discourse of ELT. Although there is obviously no quick fix to remedy the mystified ideological image depicted here, a number of transformations could be considered with regard to professional practices of the general ELT community.

First, research forums including academic conferences and journals could go beyond atomistic views of language teaching and move toward deeper contextual concerns. Traditional skill-based conceptions of language teaching research perpetuate a view of

language as a fragmented practice and this is the view resonating in several of the ideological assumptions discussed above.

Second, teacher education could be directed toward a more contextualized view of the practice of language education as part of the cultural, social, and political environment in which it takes place. Teacher education is perhaps one of the weakest links in ELT and this has obviously paved the way for perpetuating mystified images of language learning, as specifically reflected in assumptions about certificates, short-term learning, and native-speakerism.

Third, teaching materials could serve as a major transforming force that may create learner awareness to counter balance the function of dominant public discourses. Almost all the seven ideological assumptions discussed above seem to be perpetuated rather than challenged by ELT course books worldwide. More importantly, classroom life could be the major scene of dialog and awareness. Classroom practices tend to be all but agents of reproducing the mystified ideology explored in this study. Nonetheless, they may create opportunities of honest dialogs about language learning.

Finally, revisiting the ideological assumptions of commercialized ELT may highlight a more profound aspect of the issue, that is, the subtle problematic of manipulation exercised through mystified discourses. Regardless of the financial exploitation of people who dream of a painless injection of doses of English into their brain cells (as mentioned in the introductory section), a more serious manipulation could be the reproduction and perpetuation of simplistic understandings of language and learning. Such a mystified ideology might hit the very marrow of communities with reproducing the idea of language as merely a means of instrumental communication and of learning as transferring and absorbing information. This reproduced conception, distracting people from realizing the importance of language as a potentially eternal treasure as well as endless dread (Mirhosseini, 2008), and blinding them to a view of learning as aimed at living a more human life, could harm most destructively, that is, through the manipulation of minds and the exploitation of souls.

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