Ideologies of English Language Teaching in Iranian Academic Research: Mainstream, Alternative, and Beyond

Seyyed-Abdolhamid Mirhosseini\textsuperscript{a} & Reza Ghafar Samar\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a} Alzahra University, Iran
\textsuperscript{b} Tarbiat Modares University, Iran

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Mainstream trends of English language teaching (ELT) are predominantly constructed within the epistemological boundaries shaped by the traditional conceptions of linguistics, learning, and teaching as well as positivist research methodology. What tends to be overshadowed by such conceptions is the underlying foundational belief structure of ELT theory, research, and practice. Such beliefs may be named in various ways, including under the rubric of ideology. Despite the forbidding stigmas attached to the word ideology, rooted in the Marxist tradition, this study adopts a more tangible conception of the term as the most fundamental assumptions underlying any social practice, to explore ideologies of ELT in Iran. We examine the ideological assumptions detectable in the mainstream research scene of the country reflected in presentations at major national applied linguistics conferences within the past decade, as well as the ideological assumptions of a thread of alternative qualitative-critical ELT research in a few Iranian universities during the same period. The study uncovers a pentagonal dominant ideology as well as a struggling alternative ideological orientation. On this basis, the ideological landscape of the Iranian ELT arena is problematized and discussed along with probable extended messages for other contexts around the world.

Introduction

The need for ongoing theoretical revisits and practical revisions in English language teaching (ELT) as well as continued reconstruction of academic programs and courses of applied
linguistics and language education hardly requires any argument. However, it may be argued that reconsiderations of ELT theory, research, and practice remain confined to certain assumptions with regard to knowledge and language (Holliday & Aboshiha, 2009; Pennycook, 2001). The aim of the present research is to explore aspects of the current mainstream conceptions of ELT and to problematize its naturalized fundamental assumptions that may be called *ideologies*. As taken-for-granted belief frameworks embedded in social life, ideologies shape ultimate bases of social representations and regulate social attitudes and practices (Fairclough, 1989; van Dijk, 2004, 2006). Therefore, the importance of this study may be in its attempt at bursting the bounds of prevailing assumptions that survive through changing times and trends, and continue to shape the very foundation of ELT. An understanding of such underlying assumptions may have considerable contributions at different levels.

First, applied linguistics and ELT theory and research may be found to need to divert its force from within the confinements of particular epistemologies. One important aspect of this study is highlighting the concern that researchers may need to ask different research questions and to address them through approaches different from the currently predominant ones. Second, macro-level concerns such as ELT policy, curriculum, and teacher education may be seen to need to move beyond traditionally accepted norms in order to create real transformations. Continuing to work within the boundaries of the current ELT ideologies, may leave the roots untouched and may hardly lead to changes beyond the surface. Third, informed with an understanding of the ideological landscape of the field, different levels of ELT practice in various contexts, especially with a concern for change, may be equipped with more profound views conducive to improvements beyond the rudiments.

**Ideological Considerations of ELT**

Among the diverse views of *ideology* (e.g., Eagleton, 1991; Thompson, 1984), the conception of concern here is in line with van Dijk’s work on ideology in critical discourse studies (van Dijk, 1995, 1998, 2004, 2006). The term ideology may be readily
perceived within the framework of Marxist traditions and “conceptualized as false-consciousness” (Platt & Williams, 2002, p. 331). Based on this prevalent perception, ideology is usually understood as bad beliefs, and this very understanding is probably the basis of the dichotomization of ideological and nonideological beliefs (van Dijk, 1998). However, it may be naïve to use the term just as a label to mark ideas of others or to see it as disturbed views of the world (Hodge & Kress, 1988; Holborow, 2006).

Such restrictive conceptions of ideology (Thompson, 1984) have been the basis of the denial of ideology in certain belief structures and denouncing others as ideological and false (Holliday & Aboshiha, 2009; van Dijk, 1998). In Holliday’s (2010) words, “Western theories of culture . . . demonstrate a high degree of denial of ideology. In the academy there is a powerful emphasis on the scientific neutrality of theories . . .” (p. 2). A more inclusive conception may be broadly formulated as “an assemblage of ideas” (Platt & Williams, 2002, p. 330). Based on an inclusive view, ideologies are understood as fundamental or axiomatic socially-shared ideas and belief systems that define identities of social groups and “control and organize other socially shared beliefs” (van Dijk, 2006, p. 117).

The crucial social functionalities of ideologies thus defined would trigger a challenging interest in the possible treasure of studying language ideologies (e.g., Blommaert, 1999). Woolard and Schieffelin (1994) and Woolard (1998) refer to several conceptions of the term. Based on these varying conceptions, language ideologies may be generally taken as “self-evident ideas and objectives a group holds concerning roles of language in the social experiences of members as they contribute to the expression of the group” (Heath, 1977, p. 53, cited in Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994) and “shared bodies of commonsense notions about the nature of language in the world” (Rumsey, 1990, p. 346, cited in Woolard, 1998).

More recently, McGroarty (2010, p. 3), defines language ideologies as “the abstract (and often implicit) belief systems related to language and linguistic behavior that affect speakers’ choices and interpretations of communicative interaction.” Such belief systems may be seen as including a diversity of phenomena which, according to De Costa (2011), include beliefs about the very nature of language itself, values associated with linguistic
codes and hierarchies of these values, and links between codes and identities. Therefore, language ideologies as fundamental epistemological belief structures, may well act to direct and shape language use, language attitudes, language policies, and, by far more tangibly, language teaching and learning both in language communities and within the institutional contexts of language education (McGroarty, 2010; Seargeant, 2009; Spolsky, 2004).

Apart from the crucial ideologies of the English language, more specifically ELT-related issues such as critical language education, critical applied linguistics, world Englishes, and teaching English as an international language are ideological considerations (Jenkins, 2006; Norton & Toohey, 2004; Pennycook, 1999, 2001, 2010; Sharifian, 2009). Chang’s (2004) view of English teaching ideologies may explain how such concerns can be carried on to ELT research in contexts like Iran. She emphasized that ideology and language are closely linked and highlighted the importance of exploring ELT ideologies, also referred to as “taken-for-granted practices” and “common-sense assumptions” (p. 14). Despite this vitality of ideological considerations of ELT, however, the quantity of publications of the field focusing on ideology is relatively small. Moreover, there are even calls for moving beyond ideology (Larsen-Freeman, 2007) and cases of sympathy with notions like autonomy as opposed to ideology (Coleman, 1996).

Nonetheless, ELT literature does include ideological accounts. Following the entrance of the notion of critical into the field (e.g., Graman, 1988; Pennycook, 1990) and around the same time, early accounts of ideology in ELT research and practice started to emerge (Tollefson, 1990; Dendrinos, 1992). In one such early case, Benesch (1993) asserted that “all forms of ESL instruction are ideological” (p. 705). Later, Kubota (1998) raised debates on ideologies of English in Japan and Tollefson (2000) focused on more specifically ELT-related issues, and both of them referred to the dominance of English. In early 2000s, Modiano (2001) focused on ideology in relation with English teaching practitioners and the link between linguistic imperialism and ELT in Europe. More bluntly adopting a Marxist conception but proposing different ideals, Holborow (2006) argued that the dominant English language promotes ideologies of neoliberalism. More specifically, Seargeant discussed the role of ideology in
regulating ELT in Japan (2008, 2009). In a similar context, Park (2009) dealt with a diversity of sociocultural problems related to the English language in South Korea, although his conception of ideology is difficult to specify.

From a contrasting standpoint, Waters (2009) bashed ideology in language teaching. Assuming that pedagogical traditions are based on no ideological beliefs, he contended that much of today’s language teaching “lacks the relevance necessary for carrying out its mediating role in an effective manner… because a good deal of its discourse promotes or proscribes language teaching ideas on the basis of ideological belief rather than pedagogical value” (p. 138). In response to Waters, Simpson (2009) questioned the dichotomy of ideological beliefs and pedagogical values. In direct relevance to the concern of the present research on ELT ideologies in Iran, Simpson maintained that Waters failed to recognize the inextricable linkage of ideology and pedagogy. More recently, Swell (2013) discussed aspects of ideology and English as a lingua franca but he seems to be using the term in a liberal sense, broadly referring to sociocultural considerations rather than a specific conception of ideology, as such. This might indicate that the term is becoming part of the theoretical debates of the field, but at the same time it may signal its reduction and oversimplification.

In addition to theoretical discussions, there are data-based explorations of ideological concerns in ELT. Chang (2004) studied such concerns in Taiwan with notions such as “American English as standard English” shaping her conception of ideology. Similarly, Al-Issa, referring to “colonialist/culturalist” views as an important ideology governing English teaching in Oman, discussed the conflicts between this ideology and local practices (Al-Issa, 2005). Chun (2009) examined how ELT programs at a university in the United States promoted neoliberalism and its underlying ideology. With similar perspectives, the issue of ELT ideologies was considered at the policy level by Pan (2011) in exploring “ideologies in the Chinese foreign language education policies.” Setting out from Gramsci’s conception of ideology as “the terrain on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc.” (1971, cited in Pan, p. 246), Pan observed that in the Chinese language education policies, “there is an absence of ideological resistance to the promotion of English” (Pan, p. 260).
More recently, Addison (2011) investigated how English could implicitly carry Western culture and ideology, and Xiong and Qian (2012) studied ideologies of English in China as specifically represented in English teaching textbooks. In their own words, their conception of ideology was “the systematic assumptions and beliefs about the use and value of English and its varieties . . . The dominant ideology and popular ideology both take the hegemony of English for granted but for different purposes, which distinguish them from the counter hegemonic one” (p. 77). In the specific sociocultural, educational, and academic context of Iran, there have been a small number of studies on ELT ideologies, focusing on the ideological orientation of imported English teaching textbooks widely taught in Iran (Abdollahzadeh, 2010; Baleghizadeh & Motahed, 2010) and ELT ideologies in media (Mirhosseini, 2015).

An important point in the present research about considerations of ELT under the rubric of ideology is a distinction between examining ideologies in versus ideologies of ELT. Ideologies in English teaching are seen as beliefs brought in and imposed on it (e.g., consumerist, liberal, radical). Ideologies of ELT, however, in line with van Dijk’s conception (1998, 2004), may be viewed as assumptions shaping its very essence, identity, and entity. With an understanding of language as a socio-political phenomenon, ELT is now fairly sensitive to ideologies in its structure. For example, there are sensitivities to how consumerism may be reproduced in ELT (e.g., Al-Issa, 2005; Chang, 2004) and there are debates as to the confrontation of liberal Western ideologies and extremist ones (Kabel, 2007; Karmani, 2005; Mirhosseini, 2008). However, the subtle ideologies of ELT that have become part of its very being, are more difficult to problematize, and therefore, continue to escape attentions, remain scarce in the literature, and even be denied (Holliday & Aboshiha, 2009). Such ideologies of ELT, rather than ideological maneuvers in it, are the concern of this research.

The Study

The study addressed two major themes: first, ideologies of ELT detectable in the mainstream Iranian English teaching and
applied linguistics research as reflected in the presentations at seven rounds of the two major national conferences during the past decade; and, second, ideologies of ELT in a thread of alternative research shaped by a number of qualitative-critical MA theses conducted in a few Iranian universities also during the past decade. The major methodological approach of the research is a critical discourse studies perspective. The conception of critical discourse exploration relied on in this study is not a method view (Fairclough, 2003) but rather a broad theoretical qualitative research approach (van Dijk, 2004); that is, rather than adopting an already established model or framework, a contextually relevant procedure has been developed an in-depth description of which will follow.

Data

Three categories of data are explored in this research. The first body of data comprises 839 abstracts of presentations at seven rounds of the national conferences of Issues in English Language Teaching in Iran (IELTI) and conferences of Teaching English Language and Literature Society of Iran (TELLSI). IELTI was the first regularly held biannual national conference of the field since 2001 and was held four rounds as a broadly themed conference before it gave its national role to the TELLSI conferences. The Teaching English Language and Literature Society of Iran was launched in 2003 and held its annual conferences with a limited scope, but since 2007 TELLSI conferences turned to be the major national forum of the field in Iran. The 839 abstracts explored in this study include those of four conferences of IELTI and three conferences of TELLSI held between 2000 and 2011.

To illustrate an alternative trend that may create a contrasting ideological image, the second part of the data is shaped by a rather minor group of studies conducted outside the mainstream academic trend. This body of data involves 42 MA theses conducted in four Iranian universities. Their common feature is that the researchers overtly articulated their attempt at conducting an alternative research with two broadly defined characteristics of being qualitative and critical. Regardless of how these terms were defined in those studies and the extent to which
they were successful in doing a credible alternative study, the overall tendency to break up with the mainstream trend and to opt for different directions has been considered as enough qualification for the theses to be included in this second bulk of research data.

The third body of data comprises written interviews with two groups of researchers: a group of 9 academics representing the mainstream research reflected in national applied linguistics conferences, and a group of 12 researchers who conducted the alternative MA thesis studies. The interview plan and questions were developed based on the emerging patterns of ideological assumptions appearing from the exploration of the conference presentations and theses. The questions and the required explanations were emailed to the interviewees and they sent their extended responses. The written interview data may play an important role in tackling the research issues with a more informed perspective as part of the methodological triangulation required for a more dependable and credible qualitative study (Edge & Richards, 1998).

Procedure

Ideology is in intimate relationship with discourse. On the one hand, ideologies shape the ultimate basis of discourses and direct discursive practices (Fairclough, 1989; van Dijk, 1995, 2004). On the other hand, ideologies, as mostly implicit assumptions, are reproduced and naturalized by discourse (Fairclough, 1989; van Dijk, 2004). In a dialectic relationship, these reproduced ideologies in turn shape later discursive practices (Fairclough, 2001). On this basis, through close reading, ideologies may be inferred from the discourses that reproduce them (van Dijk, 1995; 2004). Therefore, critical discourse studies, which can be used “to demystify discourse by deciphering ideologies” (Jager, 2001, p. 37), shape the methodological foundation of this study.

Based on the above-mentioned relationship between discourse and ideology, thematic analysis shaped the main procedure in dealing with the data. The three elements of research problem, data, and analysis were extracted from the conference presentation abstracts and the MA theses. The themes emerging from
these data sections were taken as clues to the underlying realm of ideologies. In organizing and categorizing the extracted elements, coding procedures (including thematic, open, axial, and selective coding) were applied based on grounded theory views (Charmaz, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

To take care of the dependability and confirmability of the categorizations (Edge & Richards, 1998), after coding, four judges were asked to check the emerging patterns. They commented on the categorization of themes and subthemes and the interpretation of these categories as clues to underlying ideologies. Their comments were considered in modifying the categorizations and refining thematic patterns and their interpretation. Aimed at methodological triangulation, the emerging thematic patterns were considered in conjunction with the outcome of interview content analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Moreover, throughout the data exploration process, the “ethnomethodological indifference” position (ten Have, 2004) was observed to facilitate overall dependable and credible interpretations.

**Findings and Discussion**

**Conference Presentations**

Of 839 conference presentations, 55 were removed because their focus was exclusively either literature or translation studies. For the remaining 784 presentations, the coding was carried out based on their research problems, and 63 of them were removed either because their problems were too broad to give a clue as to an ideological underpinning or they were too marginal to fit within a general portray ELT trends, like the one focusing on the role of the brain nutrients in the learners’ concentration power. The research problems of the remaining 721 presentations included 1,130 thematic notions presented in Table 1.

The scrutiny of the data collection sections showed that out of the 784 presentations, 146 were not data-based studies but theoretical discussions. Also, the data collection procedures of 100 presentations were not specified. The remaining 538 presentations stated 821 cases of data collection. As for the data collection
analysis section, apart from the 146 nondata-based cases, there were 232 presentations that did not specify their data analysis procedures. The remaining 408 presentations stated 492 cases of data analysis. Table 2 summarizes the information about the stated cases of data collection and analysis procedures. The percentage is calculated out of the total number of the stated cases, since some abstracts stated more than one procedure and some of them used different types of the same procedure. What follows is an elaborate and detailed discussion of the final 6 themes and their overall 21 subthemes that emerged as a result of detecting patterns through a close reading and coding of the abstract contents.

- **Fragmentationism.** The first major emerging theme is the fragmentation of language and language education into pieces and fragments of skills, components, and other elements. Although this discussion is not meant to be based on the statistical imaging of the corpus under investigation, the number of abstracts that reflect each major theme may give an idea of the spread and depth of each ideological orientation. The various subthemes of
fragmentationism were found to be underlying the research problems of more than 60% of the presentations. These fragments that may defy a holistic and contextual consideration of ELT are seen in 10 different subthemes: reading, writing, speaking, listening, vocabulary, grammar, pragmatics, discourse, ESP, and miscellaneous.

Based on the idea of language skills, reading and writing are taken as cognitive abilities of coding and decoding and their holistic nature as parts of the phenomenon of language with sociocultural aspects tend to be ignored. Concerns such as linear relationships between reading and other skills and components, reading strategies, and writing assessment are among the popular notions of reading and writing fragments. In the case of speaking and listening, although they are less frequent, the discrete and atomistic nature of a skill is observable. Frequent research problems focus on teaching pronunciation, acquisition of supra-segmentals, evaluating the speaking ability, and techniques and strategies of listening.

Apart from the skills, vocabulary studies importantly illustrate how language is dissected into pieces. Probably with the

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**TABLE 2 Conference Presentation Data Collection and Data Analysis Cases**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Analysis Procedure</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Data Collection Procedure</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>t-test</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>test</td>
<td>281</td>
<td>34.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>variance analysis</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>questionnaire</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>23.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>correlation analysis</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>interview</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chi-square</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>task</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>descriptive statistics</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>writing samples</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>factor analysis</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>observation</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>regression analysis</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>academic writing corpus</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>statistical software</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>classroom recording</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other statistical procedures</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>recorded interaction</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unspecified statistical</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>21.5</td>
<td>teaching materials</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>qualitative procedures</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>electronic interaction</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unspecified qualitative</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>media discourse</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>discourse analysis</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>think aloud protocol</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mixed method</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>other written texts</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>content analysis</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>other procedures</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>models and frameworks</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other procedures</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>492</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>821</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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underlying idea that the sum of the pieces equals the whole, grammar may be the glue that can put the blocks together. Popular related research problems include acquisition of vocabulary items, word knowledge in relation with language skills, techniques of word learning and teaching, the acquisition of structures, the relationship of grammar knowledge and skills, and techniques of teaching grammar. In addition to skills and components, although discourse and pragmatics are essentially contextual concepts, isolated focus on them in thin artificial contexts is another way of avoiding a holistic consideration of real-life language. Examples are discourse markers, rhetorical structure, interlanguage pragmatics, and idiomatic language learning. English for specific purposes, with research concerns such as specific purpose syllabuses and discipline-specific language requirements, is a further subtheme of fragmentationism, and other miscellaneous fragments are also found, with the common feature of focus on some atomistic aspect of the complex world of ELT, such as question types in classroom interactions and learning idioms made of animal words.

- **Scientism.** The second major theme is *scientism*, that is, following the footsteps of modern natural science in ELT as the field stands for an independent discipline. Scientism is detectable in about 42% of the research problems of the presentations, although taking the data collection and analysis into account, the scope of scientism extends beyond 75%. *Experimentalism*, as the first subtheme of scientism, is observable in this corpus in different ways, most conspicuously reflected in terms such as the effect of, the impact of, the relationship, factor, and significant difference which are typical of experimental studies concerned with cause-effect relationships among variables. Even if part of this leaning towards experimentalism is unconscious, its ideological functioning is at work to the extent that even in cases where otherwise alternative issues are explored, such an underlying mentality resurfaces in verbalizations like the effects of Vygotsky’s ZPD on teaching. Although a Vygotskian perspective hardly goes with a positivist cause-effect link, the underlying ideology of the dominant terminology puts the two together.

Scientism is also observed in the form of *mechanicism*, that is, using the mechanical language reminiscent of factory line
discourse. Frequent appearance of words like input and output and even the word analysis in the widely used language of data analysis reflects this underlying mentality. A final subtheme of scientism is measurementism observed in the relatively large number of studies focusing on language testing as their central research concern. Based on the popular language teaching orientations of psychometrics and educational measurement, these testing studies shape a popular research topic in Iran.

The data collection and analysis sections of the presentations provide further evidence of scientism (Table 2). In more than 77% of the 821 specified cases of data collection, the instruments and procedures are experimental ones or aimed at solicited and controlled rather than naturally occurring data (including tests, questionnaires, tasks, interviews, solicited writing samples, and think-aloud protocols). Only about 12% of the cases of data collection are clearly stated to be aimed at naturalistic data (including participant observation, recorded natural class interactions, authentic media discourse, and real life teaching materials). As for data analysis, scientism, in the form of the dominance of statistical analyses, is prominently observed in 75% of the 492 cases. Fewer than 9% of the cases of data analysis are clearly stated to be based on a nonscientific procedure.

- Psycho-Cognitivism. The third major theme, observed in 29% of the presentations, is psycho-cognitivism. In line with the scientistic research atmosphere, a relatively large portion of the presentations tend to view ELT from a psychological and cognitive point of view at the expense of social, cultural, and political perspectives. Individual psychological and cognitive characteristics are undeniably part of any teaching and learning process. However, what shapes this theme is the large proportion of attention allotted to such characteristics as compared with the relative scarcity of exploring language as a sociocultural and political phenomenon beyond the individual.

Psycho-cognitivism comprises two subthemes of psychologism and cognitivism. Psychologism is reflected in specific focus on a psychological notion as part of the research problem, including issues such as attitude and motivation, learning styles and strategies, personality types, and intelligence. Cognitivism is reflected in research problems that adopt a more specifically
mental and cognitive orientation. Compared with psychologism,
cognitivism reflects a more hard-line view toward the centrality
and vitality of individual mental, cognitive, and even neurological
considerations such as mental competencies, task cognitive load,
automaticity and control in language performances, mental
processing of language structures, and memory.

- **Technologism.** The fourth major emerging ideological
theme is related to the application of technology in language
education. The need for embracing new technologies, especially
digital media and web-based networks, is evident today, but the
ideological theme of technologism highlights the concern that ELT
theory and practice might be captured and overshadowed by
technology. In this sense, specific language-education-related
issues may be marginalized and the technological concerns turn
to become the focal aspect. This may lead either to the
reproduction of mainstream concepts of language learning and
teaching or even to ignoring them and devoting the entire focus
to technology that might sometimes be too trivial. These concerns
shape the two subthemes of technologism appearing in the
research problems of more than 13% of the conference
presentations.

Shaping *mainstream reproductionism*, a majority of the research
problems that deal with technology, view conceptions of language
and education as marginal and taken for granted. Therefore,
many of the controversial ELT issues, which may need to be
problematic and revisited, are reproduced and naturalized.
Disproportionate focus on issues such as weblogs, multimedia,
computer-mediated communication, chat, cell phone use,
podcasts, and wikis tends to reproduce traditional mainstream
concepts like vocabulary learning, grammar teaching, language
skills, and proficiency. *Technology trivialism* as the second subtheme
of technologism includes studies that busy themselves with trivial
aspects of digital technology and include almost no important
mention of issues specifically related to language teaching.
Examples of such trivia are making PowerPoint slides and
formatting text appearances.

- **Intellectual Consumerism.** Intellectual consumerism denotes
an inclination towards excessively importing and consuming
academic, intellectual, and conceptual constructs form beyond the cultural and intellectual borders of the country at the expense of local sources. Considering the research problem section of the presentations, intellectual consumerism is detectable in a small proportion of fewer than 5% of them, but when the data collection instruments and the references to the literature are considered, it amounts to an almost total intellectual consumerist tendency. In research problems, intellectual consumerism is observed as a tendency toward native-speakerism, that is, taking the native-speaker norms as the point of reference of ELT research and practice. Some of the most frequent examples are comparing native and nonnative discourse; teaching of native and nonnative teachers; and native-like attainment of language proficiency.

Intellectual consumerism is also observable in the form of theoretical punterism, that is, the strong tendency to use the mainstream international theoretical products such as academic literature and research instruments at the expense of locally rooted theories. Out of hundreds of stated data collection instruments (among many others, including IELTS, TOEFL, Michigan Proficiency Test, and Eysenck questionnaire), there is only a single instrument developed in Iran (University of Tehran English Proficiency Test). Moreover, out of 832 cases of references cited in the presentation abstracts, only 37 references, or fewer than 4.5%, are the works of Iranian researchers. Even the sources written by Iranian names cannot be easily argued to reflect the Iranian intellectual and cultural wealth. Even if this is taken for granted, and even with accepting the reference to international literature as legitimate academic practice, ignoring the local literature, may indicate an ideology of theoretical punterism as part of a broader intellectual consumerist tendency within the overall ideological context of research of the field in Iran.

- Other Thematic Patterns. A few other minor patterns also emerged that show some diverging orientations not fitting the general underlying ideologies shaped by the five major themes but they are not strong enough to be recognized as part of the overall landscape and remain as struggling endeavors. Some studies reflect a sociocultural orientation and explore issues such as language education policies, intercultural competence, cultural aspects of language teaching, and sociocultural models of
language acquisition. Apart from being a minority, these social approaches in some cases suffer from the symptoms of the dominant ideologies, especially scientism. A second thin diverging ideological line is shaped by studies that problematize mainstream conceptions, like the ones dealing with political dimensions of language education, language teaching ideologies, and hidden discursive structures of tests. Such an alternative orientation, however, is too small to be recognized as a trend. Moreover, even such resisting attempts may fall in the shade of the mainstream language, like a study purporting to explore the hegemony of English but ironically stating its research concern to be the effect of the hegemony of English on Iranian university students’ attitudes.

Qualitative-Critical MA Theses

The qualitative-critical MA theses were approached with the same conceptual and methodological convictions applied to conference presentations and the research problem, data collection, and data analysis elements were extracted. The theses appeared to defy the three major themes of fragmentationism, scientism, and psycho-cognitivism. Regarding technologism, aspects of technology were seen in educational practices studied by the theses and a few qualitative research software packages were mentioned as part of their data exploration procedures but there were few specifically technology-focused concerns as the main research problem of the theses. As for intellectual consumerism, some ambivalence appeared with regard to highlighting local values and identities, and at the same time ignoring the local intellectual wealth and theoretical references.

- **Language as a Whole.** Defying the mainstream fragmentationist ideology, the theses opt for a holistic view of language. Most of the theses state their research problem in a way that depicts their consideration of language in its totality. Although the narrowing and focusing of research is done in various ways, the statement of the language aspect of the studies indicates a holistic rather than a fragmentationist stance. The whole phenomenon of language, rather than a fragmented element,
is considered in stating such research concerns as Kurdish, Persian and English language; spoken or written language; Whole Language approach; and language knowledge building processes. Even focus on a certain aspect of language is contextualized into a broader context. For example, studies exploring reading or writing, try not to cut them off from other aspects of language or broader social considerations reflected in terms such as literacy, the act of reading; meaning making; construction of the written personal self; and living writing practices.

As for fragments other than skills, the theses largely avoid fragmentationism. In the case of grammar, they tend to highlight it as part of a holistic and socioculturally contextualized understanding of language. Moreover, words, rather than being items to be memorized, are explored as part of a broader understanding of language that learners should experience through personal narratives. In the case of speaking and listening, examples of related research problems are ownership of pronunciation and how films can be textbooks by themselves in understanding movies. However, research problems of the theses do also include cases reminiscent of the fragmentationist terminology, like the one stating its concern as understanding how to influence critical reading and text readability. Nonetheless, even in dealing with text readability, a nonmainstream standpoint is observed in targeting critical reading.

- **Research as Life.** Scientism is also defied by the qualitative-critical theses. Illustrating how a scientistic ideology can be challenged, the research problems of the theses depict an image of research as contextualized and life-like search for understandings rather than a controlled artificial process based on positivism. The mechanistic factory-line terminology of input, output, and factor is simply not found in the theses, although the word analysis is used in almost all of the theses, especially in discussing data analysis. Likewise, measurementism hardly appears in the theses and even the mainstream testing notions are challenged by focusing on issues such as ongoing assessment, challenging the standard measures, and nongrading and non- valuative teaching. Regarding experimentalism, the theses show an even stronger avoidance and portray an alternative view of research as a natural quest for new meanings in as unobtrusive
manners as possible. In addition to research problems, which focus on how perceptions and practices are constructed, and on language education processes, experimentalism is defied in data collection and exploration of the theses, as well.

In 42 theses, an overall number of 242 cases of data collection were mentioned for an average of about 6 per study. Compared with the figure of 1.5 for the conference presentations discussed earlier (821 cases in 538 presentations), it may be argued that the theses looked at their research context from multiple perspectives. Moreover, out of the 242 stated cases of data collection, 150 cases included different types of naturally occurring or existing data. Compared with less than 10% naturalistic data of the conference presentations, the thesis studies were based on more than 81% contextual and natural data. Table 3 summarizes the cases of data collection procedures of the theses. As for data exploration, there is an almost unanimous nonscientistic orientation. Among the 117 stated methodological approaches, procedures, and techniques, there was only a single case of broadly referring to quantitative analysis. All the other cases of data exploration were naturalistic approaches or procedures such as ethnography, grounded theory thematic analysis, constant comparative method, qualitative action research, narrative inquiry, and life-world analysis.

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<th>Data Collection Procedure</th>
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<td>observation</td>
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• **Ambivalent Intellectual Consumerism.** The theses show a tendency to avoid intellectual consumerism and rely on local sources, but they also ignore the local references. They do not show native speakerist orientations, and many of them mention the Islamic and Iranian religious and literary sources of knowledge. Highlighting localities and emphasizing personal construction of meanings and critical reception of ideas may also be interpreted as defying intellectual consumerism, as reflected in notions such as personal narratives, language ownership, culturally contextualized materials, personal local concerns, agency construction, and dignity in student communities. Moreover, the content of the theses may illustrate aspects of a standpoint not captured by intellectual consumerism.

However, there are other elements in the theses that show a paradoxical position and can hardly be denied to belong to intellectual consumerism. A minor aspect of this intrusion is referring to certain research models and frameworks but, more importantly, a crucial concern is that despite the alternative perspectives, fundamentally, the idea of criticality and qualitative methodology need to be approached with caution. If qualitative is taken to mean a set of academic prescriptions rather than a natural thirst and quest for understanding, and if critical is interpreted as an established regime of critical pedagogy rather than truth-seeking endeavors, then the apparently alternative attempts may turn into a huge intellectual consumerist edifice. This pitfall is seen in the fact that in the abstracts of the 42 theses under exploration, there appear an overall number of 53 references to the theoretical literature of language education research, none by Iranian authors.

• **Sociopolitics of Language.** Defying the third mainstream theme of psycho-cognitivism, the theses adopt an all-out cultural, social, and political approach to the study of language learning and teaching. Even the individual, psychological, and linguistic aspects of language and education are viewed within a broad cultural and sociopolitical context. Almost all of the research problems stated in the theses are concerned with aspects of the social, cultural, and political nature of the language phenomenon. This strong orientation that obviously problematizes a strictly psycho-cognitive ideology, is reflected in thesis research
problems frequently referring to terms such as critical, liberating, dialogic, transformative, identities, social environments, community learning, libratory autonomy, hidden curriculum, and socializing events.

Written Interviews

After the initial exploration of the two major bodies of data and with the emergence of the contrasting ideological patterns, a set of interview questions was developed to probe ELT researchers’ positions on the emerging themes. A group of 9 researchers representing the mainstream research trend, and 12 researchers who conducted the alternative MA theses participated in the written interview.

- Interview Questions. The questions addressed four broad concerns. A first group of questions addressed the respondents’ opinion on the importance of considering epistemological aspects of ELT and also asked about the respondents’ own ideological research positions. The second set of questions asked about the respondents’ perspectives on the ideological patterns uncovered from the conference presentations. They were given brief introductions of the emerging thematic patterns and were asked to comment on each one of them. The third interview issue directed the respondents’ attention to the overall ideological landscape and the belief structure of the field and they were asked to take a position with regard to the nature and orientation of such an ideological atmosphere in driving the overall ELT trends. Finally, the written interview addressed the respondents’ ideas on the influence of academic ELT and applied linguistics ideologies (mainstream or otherwise) on the actual English teaching life in actual educational contexts.

- Exploring Interview Responses. The positions of the two respondent groups seemed to agree about the importance of epistemological understandings of ELT. The qualitative-critical group strongly endorsed the importance and vitality of ideological considerations of ELT and highlighted novel aspects of such considerations such as the importance of personal as well
as technical ideologies, turning to blind followers in the absence of ideological understanding, and calling for the generation of alternative research paradigms. The mainstream group also agreed that understanding ideologies is important. They put emphasis on issues like the role of ideologies in shaping actions and creating hegemonies. Nonetheless, the responses of this group also included indications of their affiliation with the mainstream trend, for example in stating that for research to be scientific, it should not be ideological. The two groups to a large extent shared the idea that the dominant ideological atmosphere of ELT in Iran is a version of the mainstream tendency depicted in this study and they referred to terms like positivist view, structuralism, and pseudo-science. In stating their own personal ideological standpoints, however, they did take sides with different positions. While the mainstream group mentioned conceptions such as pragmatism and rigor, the qualitative-critical group referred to positions like discovery of oneself and continuous struggle to craft a changing being.

About the particular mainstream ideological image uncovered in this study, the mainstream group seemed to endorse the existence and to question the dominance of scientism but expressed divided positions regarding three other ideologies. They argued for independent contribution of fragments to the general proficiency of the learners at the same time that some of them denounced reductionist positivistic views. As for psychocognitivism, their positions varied from the denial of the prevalence of psycho-cognitivism in ELT to ascribing it to cognitive linguistics and calling it a pity. Radical technologism was rejected as hegemonies of computer technology in language teaching; at the same time, however, embracing technology was endorsed for its wonderful impact on language teaching quality. The qualitative-critical group, expectedly, stood on a critical side toward fragmentationism, scientism, technologism, and intellectual consumerism. They did not, however, harshly reject psycho-cognitivism. Although some of them rejected a mere psycho-cognitive view, there were equally strong views approving of psycho-cognitive orientations by justifying them as revealing appealing secrets of the human brain.

Intellectual consumerism brings the two groups of the written interview participants closer together, almost unanimously
denouncing it. They explain its different aspects by referring to problems such as the prestige of international research, the dominance of English as a major concern for researchers, the imported nature of the entire field, and the inclination of academic credibility criteria towards foreign sources of justification. With regard to the overall landscape of the two contrasting ideological sides, the mainstream group believed in a vague notion of modification, and the other group called for the transformation of the dominant ideologies. Finally, about the influence of ideologies on the actual ELT practices, both groups agreed that the academic research hardly finds way into the realm of practice. Both groups generally agreed that academic ELT and real life English teaching are worlds apart. Such an almost unanimous position, as far as the discussion on ELT ideologies is concerned, may be interpreted as indicating that with the detachment of academia and classroom life, the ideological status quo is allowed to reproduce in practical educational contexts.

**Conclusion**

As far as ideologies of ELT are concerned, traditionally naturalized mainstream fundamental assumptions seem to rein the field in Iran, and probably to rule while being denied worldwide (Holliday & Aboshiha, 2009; Modiano, 2001). Scientism continues unquestioned even in much innovative and state-of-the-art research, such as social approaches to second language acquisition (Tarone, 2007). Psycho-cognitivism lives on, even in areas where alternative perspectives tread, such as the critical approaches and multiple intelligences (Berman, 2001). Fragmentationism also continues to rule, since despite apparent changes and progress in the field, skills and components continue to be prominent aspects of language learning. Technologism, is hardly hurt by alternative trends and even becomes the conduit for the reproduction of many traditionally controversial concepts. Finally, intellectual consumerism is evident in the very debates of many proponents of the critical rhetoric, since in a cultural context like Iran and many other contexts around the world, the critical theoretical perspectives, despite their universal gesture, tend to espouse certain ideological regimes themselves.
Probably the major theoretical distraction that prevents the ELT community from the problematization and transformation of the dominant ideology is the very philosophical roots that led to their fabrication and spread. The myths of positivistic scientific knowledge and its attachments such as rigor, objectivity, reliability, and generalizability are elements of the mentality that make it demanding to problematize the dominant knowledge forms. These notions, directly or indirectly injected into minds through years of education (Ghahremani-Ghajar & Mirhosseini, 2011), are no less active in ELT. Scientific conceptions are accepted as undeniable universal truths and perhaps that is why the epistemological foundations of the academic research, knowledge, teaching, and learning are rarely felt to require any second thought.

The absence of such theoretical revisits naturally leads to the reproduction of related theoretical understandings and lower-order methodological and practical procedures and practices. It is not surprising to encounter arguments maintaining that such ideological assumptions are conventions entrenched within identifiable theoretical orientations in the field. As historical justifications for the dominance of these assumptions, one might see discussions about the history of the association of scientism with intellectual and scientific rigor in research; about decades of striving of mainstream “second language acquisition” research to distance itself from fuzziness and subjectivity of humanities and social sciences and to pose itself as viable scientific research; and about the inevitable struggle to curry favor with granting agencies that only seek to fund real science. However, from a critical perspective, questioning these familiar justifications has been a major focus of this article.

As the uncovered ideologies and researcher positions may indicate, the ELT community, while paying lip service to the importance of the consideration of ideological issues, hardly tries to hide their affiliation with the dominant ideological trend. Therefore, in the absence of theoretical grounds and commitment for change, at the practical level the practice simply continues with its own norms that reproduce the dominant views. In mundane practice, safe tread on the normalized path is a simple and low profile but strong way of reproducing mainstream perspectives. Moreover, in the absence of the research-practice link, even the thin
light lines of alternative ideological research orientations may appear to be next to impossible to reach real ELT life, and, therefore, the practical scene is overtly left to the dominant ideology.

A further concern that might be raised regarding the ideological landscape illustrated in this study is about the academic culture of research in Iran (and probably beyond). With all the diversity of the existing and emerging alternatives to the (post)positivist and structuralist research trends, the underlying mentality of the academic field of ELT and applied linguistics seems to still have remained naively over-loyal to those traditionally comfortable conceptions of knowledge. The pentagonal ideological image discussed and illustrated above may be argued to shape the identity and nature of academic research and, by extension, the practice of ELT. Considering the crucial practice-shaping function of ideologies (Fairclough, 1989; Jager, 2001; van Dijk, 2004), this subtle but sophisticated ideological structure living within the research in this area is fully functioning to drive ELT life. The common criticality as we would call it (with the internal paradox in the odd combination of the words), may be insufficient in tackling the totality of the ideological underpinning of ELT as depicted in this study (which is possibly not limited to Iran).

Therefore, critical approaches to knowledge, language, learning, and research may need to be even more (self)critical in their encounter with the ideological structures like the ones that this study uncovers. To truly embrace a critical and alternative vision and mission in ELT theory, research, and practice, the field does need to be aware of the ideologies brought into, imposed on, and reproduced through its profession. But beyond that, and more fundamentally, ideologies of ELT are also to be consciously understood and problematized in order to avoid a deeper level captivated move on the path of the underlying assumptions that direct the entire enterprise into unnoticed, but otherwise, forceful orientations.

References


