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## Iraqi EFL Learner' Conceptions of Status of English from a Linguistic Imperialism Perspective

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### Abstract

There have so far been several studies which have investigated the attitudes of language learners and teachers towards the English language, and, specifically, towards linguistic imperialism. In the Iraqi ELT context, however, not much research has so far been conducted regarding this topic. The present study explored and examined the educated Iraqis' conceptions of the status of English from a linguistic/cultural imperialism perspective. To this end, the data was collected in two phases. The first phase was the interview, which was conducted with 30 Iraqi students majoring in English at different levels of education to develop the questionnaire. The interview data were used as themes for the development of the questionnaire, which comprised the second phase of the research. The questionnaire was distributed among 105 participants to fill out; then, it was analysed by using AMOS and SPSS software. The findings of the study indicated that the mean for the participants' responses in linguistic imperialism was 3.7, which implies that the participants somehow agreed with the questionnaire items that were related more with linguistic imperialism. Besides, the mean for the participants' responses to the items constituting cultural dominance was 2.8, which is below the middle point and shows that the students disagreed with those items forming cultural dominance. Accordingly, it could be argued that the English language, along with its cultural values, has little effect on Iraqi EFL learners. It may be concluded that the English language is preferred over other languages, but not over their mother tongue.

**Keywords:** *Linguistic imperialism, Iraqi ELT context*

## Introduction

English as an international language is the most widely taught language across the globe (Rezaeifard, 2017). Clyne and Sharifian (2008) claimed that historically English language received most of its status as an international language from the demographic, economic and political power of the English-speaking countries, particularly the U.S., and also their 'moral' advantage over Russia, Germany, and France due to either atrocities or nationalist conceit.

The current study is going to concentrate on issues such as the reasons why people prefer English over other major foreign languages like French, Russian or Turkish, or even over their mother tongue (e.g., Arabic) in communication. The supremacy of English in the globe is unavoidable, and of course, it is not illogical to suggest that with the prominence of the English language and culture, localised languages and cultures may get endangered. The global spread of English has generated strains between global and local forces and "has had serious linguistic, ideological, sociocultural, political and pedagogical implications" (Sharifian, 2009, p.1). That is why; any endeavour which helps locals to maintain their own identity and status is commendable (Pishghadam & Naji, 2012). In this line, concepts, such as World Englishes (Kachru, 1982), Multicompetence (Cook, 1999), and Native speakerism (Holliday, 2005), have come into being. Also, one of these praiseworthy endeavours was Pishghadam's approach in second/foreign language education, which is believed that it can contribute to the revival of local cultures and identities. This novel paradigm, called Applied English Language Teaching (ELT), looks at ELT as a full-fledged and scientific field of study ready to contribute and be applied to other disciplines (Pishghadam & Naji, 2012).

The main theoretical framework of the present study is based on Phillipson's (1992) work. Phillipson (1992) states that English is a vehicle of cultural and linguistic domination. Besides, he declares that linguistic imperialism is a theoretical concept which deals with linguistic hierarchisation aiming at why some languages are utilised more and others less. According to Phillipson (1992), linguistic imperialism is, in reality, a component of cultural imperialism with media, scientific, and educational imperialism, and this fact creates linguistic and cultural discriminations between English and other languages. He also views ELT as one of the main driving forces which pushed English forward. Therefore, it is worth noting that English is the main Foreign Language (F.L.) that is widely taught in Iraqi educational institutions. This study tried to explore the linguistic imperialism aspect of English as a foreign language (EFL) in Iraq according to Iraqi students' perspectives together with the increased attention to English as a sign of change in Iraqi students' attitudes toward the language and resulting in a promotion of the linguistic/cultural imperialism aspect.

English has been serving an international role as the major language of communication at a global level. As such, the excessively advocated spread of the English language by the U.K. and USA and the significance granted to the language as a lingua franca had made English acquire the label of a global Linguistic Imperialism (LI). The preeminence of English is seen by linguistic imperialism as developed and reinforced by the constant reproduction of structural and

cultural discrepancies between English and other languages (Phillipson, 1992). Consequently, the Western culture associated with English also brought about its dominance. As Phillipson (1992) indicates, both the U.K. and the USA have been contributing to the spread of English as a global language. As a result, the whole world has been turned into one village at levels of economic, political and cultural through the use of internet, mass media and other communication means. In this line, ELT is regarded as a key player in cultural imperialism and a source of Anglo-Americanization. Accordingly, the present study is going to discover the status of English as a foreign language in the Iraqi educational context to find out how the educated individuals perceive it from both a linguistic and cultural point of view. In order to achieve the objectives of the study, the researcher proposes the following research question to be sought throughout the study:

**RQ.:** To what extent do the Iraqi educated people see traces of linguistic/cultural imperialism in the spread of English throughout the world and their own country?

### **Review of the Literature**

Different scholars had various views towards linguistic imperialism (e.g. Cook, 1999; Crystal, 1997; Holliday, 1994; Pennycook, 1998) and the notion of the periphery (e.g. Canagarajah, 1999; Rajagopalan, 1999, 2004). Based on the literature review, most scholars have considered appropriation and localisation as a means of dealing with the issue. Crystal (1997) viewed English as a neutral and beneficial mean for global understanding, and free of any cultural, ideological and political baggage. He related the dominance of English as a global language to the power and perceived success of the people and nations who speak it and to its being at the right place and the right time. Taking a postcolonial and postmodern view, Canagarajah (1999) argued for a ‘third way’ of critical negotiation in which periphery learners will become insiders and utilise the language in their terms based on their ambition, requirements, and values ... not as slaves, but as agents ... creatively and critically.

Rajagopalan (1999) criticised Phillipson (1992) by stating that that English in its current status or as he calls it “World English” cannot be restricted to the native speaker standards. He also accepted the idea of “hybridity” as a remedy to the situation (Rajagopalan, 2004). Scott (2006) explained that “hybridity” refers to the mixing of local and global cultures in globalisation. Phillipson (1992) and Graddol (2000) concerned with the application of English and demonstrate some areas, including, medicine and computers; software; education systems, international banking, economic affairs and trade, advertising for global brands, youth, culture and sport, audiovisual cultural products namely, popular music, film, television, international tourism, university education, international safety (airline and maritime travels), international law, as a “relay language” in interpretation and translation, technology transfer, and intercommunication, as basic domains where English has principal dominance.

However, Spolsky (2004) criticised Philipson’s idea of linguistic imperialism. He believed that Phillipson’s (1992) book subscribed to a “conspiracy theory”. Spolsky claimed that Phillipson (1992) had provided the basis for the spread of English to effective management by the core English-speaking countries and their governments. Phillipson (2009) responded to

Spolsky's (2004) critique, stating that his idea of linguistic imperialism cannot be diminished to a 'conspiracy' theory, idea that is theoretically insufficient and mostly serves to divert attention from underlying foreign policy objectives and the realities of how dominance and inequality are kept and legitimated. In response to Spolsky (2004), Phillipson (2009) explained that it is implausible to conceive of the spread of language without there being any causal element, and thus Spolsky's critique is meaningless.

The spread of English is a symbol of "modernisation theory" arguing that Western societies provide the most successful model for underdeveloped societies aimed at reproducing the industrialisation achievements (Tollefson, 1991). The reasons for which English is employed became more complete than ever. Everywhere it is at the leading edge of technological and scientific development, new thinking in economics and management, new literatures and entertainment genres. These give rise to new vocabularies, grammatical forms and ways of speaking and writing (Graddol, 2000). As Nunan (2003) mentioned, the emergence of English as a global language will seriously impact language planning and policy making in every society.

English as a foreign language came into being in the Iraqi educational system with the British occupation in 1918. According to Ahmed and Hassoon (2017), in Iraq, in the first place, the English language was taught in urban schools as a compulsory subject only to serve the main goals of the British local authorities. They also mentioned that the point above is supported by Al Chalabi's claim (1976) that English started to be educated as a Second Language (SL) from the first primary year during the first year of the British occupation. However, later, there was a decision to instruct English from the fifth primary year, and its status was altered from a Second Language (SL) to a Foreign Language (FL).

As Ahmad and Hassoon (2017) stated that after the American occupation of Iraq in 2003, there is a remarkable change in the status of EFL, particularly in the educational sector, and the Iraqi educational authorities took a decision to teach English in the first-year primary stage and to adopt an international model for the curricula for teaching English at the pre-university educational stages. As a result, the number of students desiring to join the Departments of English increases, shifting from Arabic to English as a medium of instruction especially at the scientific colleges like colleges of medicine, colleges of pharmacy, and colleges of engineering. With their different majors, and many postgraduate students at such colleges prefer to write their theses in English. Indeed, individuals cannot isolate themselves from the global village or disclaim the significant function of the English language in today's world. What people can do is turn ELT into their service. This is the main stage in decreasing attachment on centre countries and having a voice in the globalised field of ELT (Pishghadam & Naji Meidani, 2012).

Rezaei (2017), in his PhD thesis, explored professors' conceptions of linguistic imperialism through three different aspects, namely, Globalization, Localization, and Glocalization (GLG). He also discovered the impact of teachers' view towards GLG on their success. He designed and validated a GLG scale, and then it tried to explore the association between English teachers' view in GLG and their success. The results showed that those EFL teachers who believed in glocalisation were supposed more successful by their students. Besides, the association between

gender and GLG and teachers' success were assessed through t-tests, the findings indicated that female students are more interested in 'glocalisation', and male learners are more interested in 'globalisation'. In contrast, female learners believed that the teachers whose thoughts are around glocalisation were supposed more successful than the others. He also mentioned that majority of the EFL university professors were aware of the threats of linguistic imperialism and its possible negative and harmful impacts on their students' identity and culture.

Phillipson (2018) identified the main constituents of linguistic imperialism and presented some critiques of it. In his study, some examples of the way English was developed in the U.K. and USA and how European languages were exported and consolidated worldwide were reviewed to indicate the devastating consequences for other cultures and languages. He concluded that linguistic and cultural imperialism is a fact in different contexts around the world. Among the extreme cases, he referred to Turkey and China.

Todorova and Todorova (2018) conducted a research study to explore globalisation, linguistic imperialism and the function of the English language. They concluded that linguistic imperialism had become a fact of modern life. They also claimed that international communication is one of the most significant factors of linguistic imperialism. Therefore, the importance of world languages under conditions of linguistic imperialism is hard to overestimate.

Moreover, Eames (2019) investigated the effect of imperialism on language loss and endangerment. The researcher concluded that languages are dying all worldwide at an alarming speed, unprecedented before. It is obvious that this enhancing speed of decline, all over the world, is because of abuses performed against these speech communities during colonialism, democratic nationalism and globalisation, which took both legislative and physical action to homogenous the world in the interest of imperialist forces.

Recently, AbdAlla and Mohammed (2020) examined the effects of English globalisation and linguistic imperialism on students' cultural identity. It also explored L2 that learners employ English at the expense of their mother languages. They concluded that the impacts of linguistic imperialism could be both negative and positive. Although there are growing concerns among the learners regarding the negative impacts of linguistic imperialism on their identities and cultures, many people view the spread of English as a positive fact, a symbol of success, employment, learning and modernity.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

This study took a sample of Iraqi educated people from different cities of Iraq, practising different professions and their majors of study is TEFL, in order to collect their views about English as a foreign language. The number of participants was 105, they were selected from different levels of education (B.A.; 65, MA; 30, and PhD; 10). They were both male (N=56) and female (N=49) TEFL students in different ages ranging from 23 to 38 (M=24.28, SD=3.47). Their field of study was English language teaching. The sampling procedure was based on convenient sampling.

### Instrumentation

To determine students' view towards the status of English among the Iraqi educated people, the researcher developed and validated a questionnaire. The aim was to find out about the students' viewpoints concerning the status of English in Iraq, and whether there is any traces of linguistic/cultural imperialism in Iraq which may affect the language teaching and learning in the Iraqi EFL context. The designed questionnaire comprises 15 statements evaluating two sub-constructs: linguistic imperialism and cultural imperialism. Linguistic imperialism has ten items, and cultural imperialism has five items. The results revealed that linguistic and cultural imperialism are correlated positively and significantly ( $B=.73, p<.05$ ). The scale measures the two sub-constructs via a 5-point Likert-type response format ranging from "strongly disagree", "disagree", "indifferent", "agree" to "strongly agree" to measure the students' responses to the questionnaire items. Each one of these choices has its code, respectively 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. Validity evidence for construct interpretation was investigated through Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). The validity indices computed via CFA were as follows: the *chi-square/df ratio*= 2.30, the *RMSEA*= .07, *GFI*= .92 and *CFI*= .90. The Cronbach's alpha estimate for the total scale was found to be .93 regarding 15 items. All items had accepted factor loadings and ranged from .92 (item 8) to .59 (item 13).

### Procedure

The procedure to gather the data for the present study firstly included administering a semi-structured interview with 30 participants, to survey their attitudes toward the status of English and develop the questionnaire. The designed questionnaire had been distributed among 105 Iraqi students to be filled out. In order to statistically analyse the quantitative data, the researcher utilised both SPS and AMOS. Firstly, in order to examine the validity of the designed questionnaire, CFA was used. Based on the CFA analysis, the association between each sub-factor of the proposed model was analysed. Then, descriptive analysis was reported to show the frequency and percentage of responses.

### Results

As stated before, 105 participants filled out the questionnaire, which consisted of 15 items. Descriptive analysis was employed to present the frequency and percentage of the students' attitudes towards traces of linguistic/cultural imperialism in the spread of English throughout the world or in Iraq. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of linguistic/cultural imperialism, including variance and mean.

Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics of Linguistic/Cultural Imperialism Including Variance and Mean*

Variables	N	Mean	Variance
Linguistic Imperialism	105	3.70	.96
Cultural Imperialism	105	2.80	1.16

In Table 1, variance shows whether the participants think homogeneously concerning linguistic/cultural imperialism or not. The variance for linguistic imperialism is .96 indicating a small variance. It means that the participants are homogeneous with regard to linguistic imperialism. The responses were codified from 1 to 5, with 3 being in the middle. The mean for the participants' responses in linguistic imperialism was 3.7, which shows that it is above the middle point. So, it implies that the participants somehow agreed with the questionnaire items that were related more with linguistic imperialism. In addition, the mean for the participants' responses to the items constituting cultural dominance was 2.8, which is below the middle point and shows that the students disagreed with those items forming cultural dominance. The variance was 1.162, showing that the participant's opinions about this issue in comparison with linguistic imperialism were more heterogeneous. Table 2 shows the results of the descriptive analysis for students' opinions about Linguistic Imperialism, including frequency and percentage.

Table 2

*Descriptive Statistics Relevant to Linguistic Imperialism*

		Linguistic Imperialism			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	4	3.8	3.8	3.8
	Disagree	5	4.8	4.8	8.6
	Indifferent	31	29.5	29.5	38.1
	Agree	43	41.0	41.0	79.0
	Strongly Agree	22	21.0	21.0	100.0
Total		105	100.0	100.0	

Table 2 consists of four columns. The first column shows frequency, the second column shows per cent, the third column shows valid per cent, and the fourth column shows cumulative per cent. The most important one is the valid per cent which has been shown in Figure 1 that 41% of the participants agreed, %29.5 neither agreed nor disagreed (indifferent), %21 strongly agreed, %4.8 disagreed, and %3.8 strongly disagreed with the items constituting linguistic imperialism.

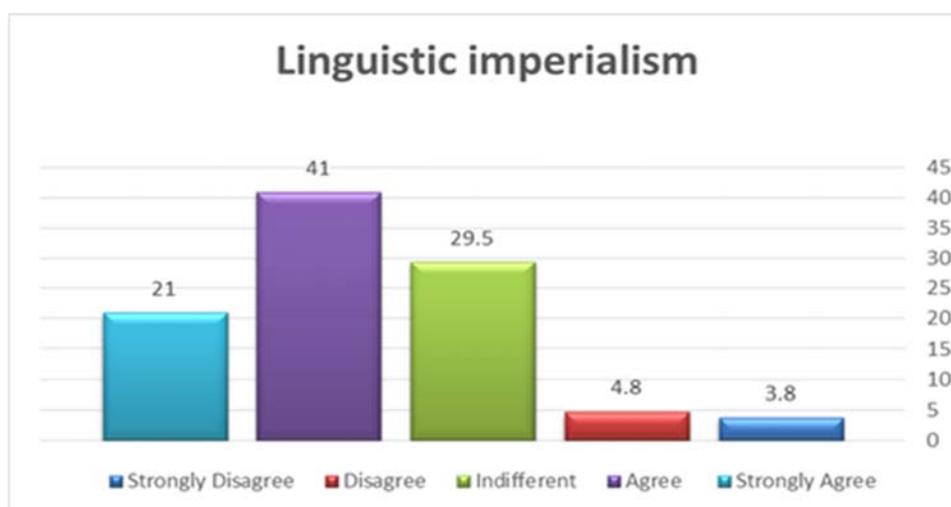


Figure 1. Linguistic imperialism

The second aspect that this study is dealing with is the cultural dominance or as some scholars have suggested it, a kind of cultural imperialism. Table 3 shows the results of the descriptive analysis for students' opinions about cultural Imperialism, including frequency and percentage.

Table 3

*Descriptive Statistics Relevant to Cultural Imperialism*

		Cultural Dominance			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	13	12.4	12.4	12.4
	Disagree	28	26.7	26.7	39.0
	Indifferent	37	35.2	35.2	74.3
	Agree	21	20.0	20.0	94.3
	Strongly Agree	6	5.7	5.7	100.0
Total		105	100.0	100.0	

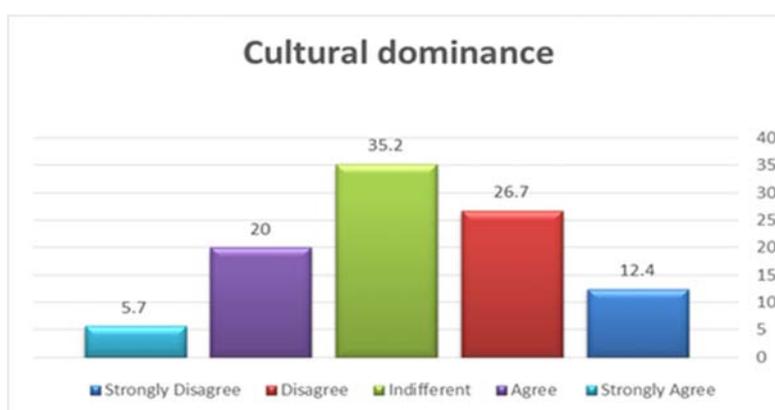


Figure 2. Cultural Dominance

Figure 2 derived from Table 3 and shows that a large number of the participants were indifferent 35.2 % regarding cultural dominance. Also, 26.7% of them disagreed, 20% agreed, 12.4% strongly disagreed, and 5.7% strongly agreed with those items constituting cultural dominance.

## Discussion

Linguistic imperialism gives attention to the potential consequences of English teaching worldwide when centre country ideologies are embedded in instruction, having the effect of legitimising colonial or establishment power and resources, and of reconstructing cultural differences between English language and other languages (Phillipson, 1992). The findings of the study indicated that the participants somehow agreed with the questionnaire items that were related more with linguistic imperialism. In addition, results showed that the students disagreed with those items forming cultural dominance. As a conclusion, it could be argued that the English language, along with its cultural values have little effect on Iraqi EFL learners. It may be concluded that the English language is preferred over other languages, but not over their mother tongue. According to Todorova and Todorova (2018), linguistic imperialism has become a reality of modern life, and its occurrence is natural.

Our results share some similarities with Rezaeifard (2017), who conducted his study in Iran. On the one hand, Iraqi learners, like Iranian learners, had positive attitudes toward the English language. By conducting this study and depending on the results of the interview and the questionnaire, the researcher maintained that there is no traces for linguistic/cultural imperialism in Iraq. While Rezaeifard's study in Iran suggested that English language and its teaching which promotes it carry imperialistic influences to the point that anything that lacks English or, in this case, American English features, is not worth learning or trying.

Additionally, this study is in line with Ahmed and Hassoon's result (2017) concerning the traces of linguistic imperialism in Iraq. They concluded that there is a linguistic imperialism dimension of EFL within the Iraqi context due to the realisation of the significance of English as an international language of much use in various everyday aspects.

Even though Iraqi English learners are exposed to the western culture through English text books in Iraqi classes, they retain their native culture more than any other culture. By comparing this study with Hejazi and Fatemi's study (2015), which was carried out in Iran and indicated that the learners whose field of study is EFL are more separated from their home culture. The occurrence of this detachment is because of their abundant exposure to the English language while their academic studies, the result of Fatemi's study is opposite to our study. Hejazi and Fatemi, by their study in Iran, tried to prove that exposure to the language will affect the language learners' identity and ultimately their culture. Since English possesses a dominant nature, the EFL learners quite indirectly get affected by this dominance and show detachment from their own culture that may have more constraints. The results thus support the assumption that familiarity with Western language and culture will diminish the influence of local culture. Besides, Pishghadam and Zabihi (2012) stated that one of the most unfortunate facts about the

present position of English in Iran is that Iranian English language instructors place a very high premium on obtaining and imitating the Standard English which is often viewed as the main standard for the employment of English instructors by most language institutes. They also claimed that unfortunately, it seems that language institutes are indirectly paved the way for the maintenance about the superiority of the Western culture over Iranian culture for teaching language (Pishghadam&Zabihi, 2012). Our study has differences with what was reached in Iran. However, based on the results of the present study, in Iraqi EFL context, keeping one's identity and cultural identity is one of the most significant goals for everyone. Therefore, different aspects of English language culture introduced into Iraqi society are restricted to those that do not create any threats.

### **Conclusion**

This study was conducted to address questions related to the status of English in the Iraqi academic context. Overall, depending on the results of the interview and the questionnaire that the researchers hold in Iraq with Iraqi educated people and according to the data analysed through the statistical technique, she reached to a conclusion that English is certainly more dominant in Iraq than other languages. Most of the Iraqi people consider mastering English as a sort of social privilege and prestige. Moreover, to go in line with academic progress and scientific advancement, people should be well informed with the English language as it is considered as the language of modern technology and science so that it would be necessary for the development of our own country. Although Iraqi educated people are neutral about those who do not know the English language, those people will have few opportunities to get good jobs in Iraq.

Of course, there may be a little sense of worry if the English language spreads more in Iraq in the long run, but not to the degree that undermining or abandoning the use of our mother tongue. Iraqi people look at English just like a "verbal passport" to travel around the world. Furthermore, to communicate with different cultures, customs and people's lifestyles in other countries. This study indicated that Iraqi learners had positive attitudes toward the English language, but not on account of their native language. Awareness of linguistic imperialism helps us to turn ELT into the benefit of our local context. The current study can only be regarded as a preliminary reference which assists teachers and learners of the English language to know important factors in teaching and learning the English language. Eventually, as far as pedagogical implications are concerned, they are divided into two parts as follows: As mentioned above that English language teachers plays an important role in fostering the cultural and national identity of students. Teachers are considered the heart of the EFL educational process. The teacher themselves can make their class either as a place for evolving and encouraging the cultural and national identity of their students or a place for reinforcement the western culture and values which more associated with the English language. Undoubtedly, knowing English culture can help learn the English language. So, this study recommends English teacher to make a balance

between the native language and national culture on one hand and English language and western culture which associated with it on the other hand.

In addition to the teacher, a learner is also an important part of the educational process. This study can be valuable for Learners because they are considered recipients of knowledge. It attempts to help and direct Iraqi English learners in learning English as a foreign language. Iraqi learners should not be very influenced by the western culture which associated with English, or at least; it would be more beneficial if they concentrate only on the good side of this culture. As a result, the effect of linguistic/cultural imperialism in Iraq will be reduced gradually

Further research should be carried out to investigate the role and importance of the teacher, especially, English teacher in increasing and decreasing the linguistic/cultural imperialism in any country and any language. Moreover, further study is required to explore the ability to apply Applied ELT approach in Iraqi educational institutions to maintain Arabic language proficiency in Iraq. Finally, further researchers should try to expand and replicate this study to a large number of educated people in Iraq from different majors of study.

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## Ethics Declarations

## Competing Interests

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