

An Interview with Dr. Saeed Rezaei on Language Identity, SELT Conference, and TESOL in Australia

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THRESHOLD: I would like to start by thanking you for accepting our invitation to have this interview with our journal. Can you tell us about your educational and professional background and the reasons you chose to major in TESOL?

Dr. Rezaei: Well, in the zeitgeist of the sixties in the Iranian calendar, most students were fascinated by the idea of becoming an engineer, physician, or pilot to name the most popular careers; however, even then I cherished the idea of becoming a teacher. Therefore, I sat for the Foreign Languages Entrance Exam and was admitted to the University of Isfahan where my passion for Persian and English literature was also rekindled. I studied English Literature for my BA but shifted to study TEFL for my Master and PhD at Allameh Tabataba'i University.

THRESHOLD: Sharif Languages and Linguistics Center recently organized an ELT Conference. Can you give us a very brief report on the conference? And is SELT going to be held every year from now on?

Dr. Rezaei: Before responding to your question, I should tell you that I am honored to be working in a very cordial scholarly atmosphere with colleagues equipped with diverse areas of interest. The SELT conference was a valuable academic experience for us at Sharif to showcase our capabilities as a newly established center offering graduate programs in humanities in a university widely known for sciences and engineering. Following our successful organization of the third International Conference on Computational Linguistics in 2014, we put an ELT conference on the agenda. For the conference, we received a large number of quality papers from both Iranian and foreign universities and I should hereby thank all those who supported us during the conference. As for your second question, my colleagues have raised the same issue and we hope we will be able to continue this event.

THRESHOLD: As your publications clearly show, your main research interest is language and identity. I think it is one of the hot topics nowadays that many like to know more about. What is the significance of this area of research? How can identity foster or hinder second language acquisition? How can learning a second language modify one's identity? Or let's put it this way: What is the interaction between language and identity?

Dr. Rezaei: With the rise of globalization and the convoluted nature of identity, people can no longer be easily labeled based on their appearance. Immigrant attracting countries such as Canada have now turned into melting pots; therefore, naming an almond eye Canadian citizen, for instance, as Korean or Japanese, would sometimes culminate in an altercation because identity is no longer a matter of stereotypes. That is what the post-structuralist theoreticians, like Bonny Norton, propose: identity is in a state of flux, malleable and always changing! This is in stark contrast to the essentialist view of identity where stereotypes bring prejudice, racism, and bias into play. The significance of research on identity issues in today's world is gaining popularity due to the modern phenomenon of mass migration, multilingual interactionism in diaspora communities, study abroad programs, and intercultural communication inter alia.

For me Iran, as a home to diverse ethnicities and language varieties, provides a promising ground for the studies on language and identity. This line of research is subsumed under sociolinguistic categories of research but the methodology adopted could be discorsal (e.g. conversation analysis) and its implications educational. There are several interesting lines of research in this regard; an example is the language classes in multilingual contexts in Iran like villages in Western Azerbaijan Province- where school kids may have Persian, Azeri, or Kurdish as their native language. In such contexts, teachers should do code switching and mixing to teach English to their students. I believe that the social issues that arise within the Iranian multilingual and multicultural milieu have interesting implications for our context. With regard to the vitality of this area of research, the launch of several journals (e.g. Journal of Language, Identity, and Education) attests to its importance.

As for the relationship between language and identity, I can recommend the newly published Routledge Handbook of Language Identity edited by Dr. Siân Preece (2016) but once you consult this handbook you face a diversity of topics for research. In brief, according to Pierre Bourdieu language is a commodity loaded with different sorts of capital through which people can display part of their identity. In other words, the language, dialect, or accent you converse in along with the attitudes and mindsets we have of them display our language identity.

THRESHOLD: What are the researchers working on this area basically looking for nowadays? What are some of the new research trends? And what are the major challenges that they face researching identity? I'm asking these questions specifically because I'm pretty sure some of our readers might want to zoom in on this area for their MA or PhD theses. What do they need to know before they step into this research area?

Dr. Rezaei: That's a very good question! So many students approach me and enquire about this issue but some confuse this area with the studies of professional identity in teacher education. The area of research I am addressing falls more within the sociology of language.

There are several interesting topics for research in this area, which fly out of the boundaries of TEFL and would fall more within Applied (Socio)linguistic studies. Examples include multilingualism, identity, and

education in multilingual speaking regions in Iran such as Sistan and Baluchestan, Azerbaijan, and Kurdistan. Ethnographic and fieldwork studies, I believe, can yield interesting results as far as the intersection of language and identity is concerned in such contexts. Another interesting topic could be the phenomenon of identity formation in online courses and how language presents itself as a source of identity and ideology construction in the virtual world. In response to the need to work on language and identity in diasporic communities, I think working on the Afghan refugees in Iran would be also very interesting.

As for the inherent problems early career researchers or students may encounter, I can refer to the prolonged engagement that these researchers need to have with the research project, something that is not be easily accomplished for an MA thesis unless they focus on case studies. Another issue which may arise here can be ascribed to its research methods. Recent publications in this area welcome more qualitative research tools (e.g. ethnography, field notes, narrative enquiry) though survey research as an experimental tool is also welcomed. Finally, most of our graduate students put English on the pedestal because within our field language is synonymous with English (I study English: *Zaban mikhunam*) while Applied Linguistics welcomes other languages in language education studies. When we are talking about language and identity issues, local languages and dialects should be also researched.



THRESHOLD: How do you relate language identity to other topics in TESOL? For example, how intertwined are language identity and culture? How does it relate to acculturation?

Dr. Rezaei: The studies on identity are not limited to educationalists as its roots can be traced in sociology, politics, anthropology, philosophy, and psychology. In other words, identity in language studies is inter/trans-disciplinary as it borrows a lot from other fields. An example bearing witness to the significance of identity in TESOL can be the study-abroad programs, minority groups and their language education dreams, language learners in diaspora and the place of language as a source of identity, teen language learners in Iran and their early exposure to L2, language learning materials especially textbooks and media as sources of identity construction, and the list goes on and on.

As for the second part of your question, scholars believe that identity forms the cornerstone of human being and the culture or milieu in which they inhabit. Therefore, there is definitely an intricate relation between culture and identity. Acculturation is also a very promising area of research in L2 contexts. An example is a research an Iranian friend of mine is now conducting as part of his PhD on the language, identity, and acculturation of Iranian refugees in Australia.

THRESHOLD: You and Dr. Khatib have also developed a model and questionnaire of language identity using a structural equation modelling approach. Can you please tell us more about this project and the objectives it pursued?

Dr. Rezaei: I embarked on that project as part of my doctoral dissertation under the supervision of Prof. Khatib, Prof. Marefat, and Prof. Baleghizadeh. As other studies on the topic, it followed an inter/trans/multi-disciplinary objective with the final goal of formulating what encompasses identity for English language learners in Iran. I think your readers can consult the publications we have for further readings on the topic. To put it in a nutshell, I had a heuristic approach to propose a language identity model in Iran. To achieve this purpose, multiple phases were planned including hypothesizing a model, testing the model, and finally collecting the data through the questionnaire developed and validated based on the model proposed a priori.



THRESHOLD: In your research records, we also see a few publications on corrective feedback, but you seem to have abandoned it for some time now. Is that true? And, if yes, why? Do you consider corrective feedback an over-researched area already?

Dr. Rezaei: You are right. That was part of my master outputs. I published three papers on this topic but later I was attracted to more socio hyphenated areas of research like the sociolinguistics of identity. There were several reasons which motivated me to change my track. The first and foremost was my personal

interest in interdisciplinary fields, what I can get satiated with more. I think sociology of language and education within the Iranian ELT has been left under-researched to a large extent because they are not generally within the Iranian ELT researchers' bailiwick. Nonetheless, I have seen more publications recently with a focus on discourse and sociology of language education. On the other hand, to me researching on *corrective feedback* or *which method to teach* is long approved to be contextually determined and hence dependent on many slippery factors. In spite of all these concerns, I think working on corrective feedback in teaching Persian to non-native speakers can have more relevance and implications for our context.

THRESHOLD: You spent your PhD sabbatical at Macquarie University in Australia. How did you find that? How do you compare TESOL, and academia in general, in Australia with that in Iran?

Dr. Rezaei: There are several differences between Graduate Studies in Iran and Australia. As far as I know most PhD studies in Australia are funded and therefore researchers and doctoral students feel more supportive and therefore accountable in their studies. The areas of research are also narrow but deep in methodology. Facilities are also more conveniently at hand and students do not worry about the availability of textbooks or papers. Moreover, most (if not all) doctoral students go on a sabbatical during their doctoral studies and therefore they work with different international figures whose works form cutting-edge research. One more interesting difference is that students are not pushed to publish whereas in Iran we have a publication marathon. The publish-or-perish-tug-of-war has become an epidemic in our whole academia; in some cases this has beguiled our students to breach the academic rules in order to fulfill the far-reaching standards set by the ministry or universities. I think it is good that students are encouraged to publish their work but it should be set at a realistic level. The last difference I can recall is that we in Iran have some theoretical courses in PhD and have a comprehensive exam before we embark on our doctoral dissertation, something Australian universities do not have. I think the courses offered can consolidate the students' knowledge in different areas of research. Regardless of all these strengths and weaknesses, I think Iranian students are very hardworking, ambitious, and intelligent.

THRESHOLD: Thank you for your time, Dr. Rezaei.