Language Socialization During COVID-19: Evolving Attitudes of EFL Learners

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted significant transformations in education systems globally. Consequently, this qualitative ethnographic study aimed to analyze the evolution of attitudes among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners through the lens of language socialization (LS). Additionally, the study explored the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic on the LS of Iranian EFL learners within cyberspace through prolonged engagement and triangulated data collection, including classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, researcher field notes, audio recordings, and student journals. This approach allowed for a holistic understanding of the Iranian culture from participants' perspectives. A triangulation of data was collected, comprising class observations, semi-structured interviews, researcher notes, audio recordings, and student journals. The Data analysis was conducted using MAXQDA Analytic Pro 2020. Based on the seven principles of LS, the results identified eight categories: cultural familiarity, cultural differences, the influence of foreign culture, changes in identity and behavior, online class recording, online learning, self-efficacy, and participation in virtual groups. Ultimately, this study concluded that language and culture are intrinsically intertwined and that learners' engagement with language and culture adversely impacts their socialization within the English language and culture. Furthermore, online classes were found to enhance learners' self-efficacy while reducing anxiety levels. The findings equip EFL educators with strategies for fostering adaptive language socialization during crises, while offering learners tools to navigate disruptions through reflection and virtual communities. Additionally, they guide researchers in studying attitude evolution ethnographically and urge material developers to integrate psychosocial elements into language resources for volatile environments.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, EFL Learners' Attitude, Ethnography, Language Socialization, Online Class

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Language serves as a "primary medium for cultural participation and the negotiation of social belonging" (Duff, 2022, p. 115), enabling individuals to engage with and assimilate into communities. As Rymes and Leone (2020, p. 8) emphasize, linguistic practices—both "explicit instruction and covert socialization pwrocesses"—integrate newcomers into a group's belief systems while familiarizing them with "community-specific semiotic resources" (p. 9). Consequently, language socialization (LS) is defined by Sterponi and Lai (2023, p. 3) as a "bidirectional process" that simultaneously: (1) facilitates "the acquisition of language-mediated cultural schemas" and (2) fosters "alignment with socially ratified identities." Language thus operates dynamically as both a "vehicle for social inclusion" (De León & García-Sánchez, 2021, p. 76) and a "central objective of socialization" (Moore, 2020, p. 142).

Friedman (2019) elucidates that LS examines how newcomers acquire effective modes of speaking, acting, and being recognized within a community of practice. This framework emphasizes the newcomers' engagement in culturally significant activities alongside proficient community members while highlighting the role of language as a mediating force in this process. It takes into account both explicit and implicit messages conveyed through socializing interactions. Through such exchanges, newcomers are socialized to utilize language accurately, thereby constructing their membership within the community (Lee & Bucholtz, 2015).

Duff (2007) posited that socialization in a second language (L2) shares numerous principles with socialization in a first language (L1). Furthermore, the complexity of engaging with children or adults who possess an existing repertoire of linguistic, discursive, and cultural traditions, as well as community collaborations, complicates the introduction of new traditions. L2 socialization conceptualizes the interactions between novice and expert learners as a fundamental process that facilitates opportunities for learners to utilize linguistic and semiotic resources within digitally mediated environments (Solmaz, 2020), particularly in the context of online classes necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

As highlighted in current research from LS, the language development and usage of L2 learners are influenced by their focus on social and linguistic environments in online contexts (Reinhardt & Thorne, 2017). With advancements in technology introducing modern methods and emergent literacies, it is essential to acknowledge the role of socio-interactive tools. These tools, including collaborative reading platforms, facilitate LS experiences for L2 learners in pedagogical domains (Solmaz, 2020). As part of the socialization process, developing proficiency is vital. Students, particularly in online classes, acquire new language forms and utilize them to navigate their experiences in L2 (Nguyen & Kellogg, 2005).

Language socialization has long captured the attention of researchers in second and foreign language education (Al-Hamzi & Hamida, 2021; Chen et al., 2021; Ou & Gu, 2021; Sang, 2023; Schneider & Jin, 2022; Takada, 2022; Wang & Jokikokko, 2022); however, much remains unexplored regarding the foreign language socialization process, particularly concerning how language socialization impacts EFL learners' attitudes. Furthermore, there is a pressing need to study LS in contexts where students possess diverse proficiency levels, as seen in English

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institutions (Byon, 2006). By conceptualizing L2 socialization as a lifelong, discursive, non-linear, and multi-directional process, LS theorists and researchers emphasize the importance of ethnographic approaches (Duff, 2012).

Language Socialization Theory

The conceptual framework of language socialization (LS), first articulated by Ochs and Schieffelin (1984), posits a dual process: *socialization through language* (where linguistic interactions transmit cultural knowledge) and *socialization to use language* (where novices acquire context-appropriate communicative competence). This framework situates LS as a dynamic, bidirectional process wherein socio-cultural norms, identities, and power structures are both reproduced and transformed through interactional practices (Duff & May, 2017). Central to this model is the role of *expert-novice interactions*, where proficient members of a community scaffold newcomers' acquisition of linguistic and cultural capital, embedding ideologies and values into discursive practices (Hale, 2023). Crucially, LS theory rejects static cultural transmission, instead framing societal phenomena as contested, negotiated, and continually reshaped through language use (Garrett & Baquedano-López, 2022).

Language as a Mechanism of Cultural Reproduction and Change

Language, within this paradigm, functions as both a *tool* for cultural perpetuation and a *site* of ideological struggle. Ochs (2002) underscores its role in "indexing social positions" (p. 106), where linguistic choices (e.g., address forms, narrative structures) implicitly encode hierarchies and belonging. For instance, Schieffelin and Ochs' (1986) cross-cultural analyses reveal that child-directed speech (e.g., "baby talk") is not universal but culturally mediated, challenging assumptions of linguistic universals. Subsequent studies (e.g., Burdelski, 2021; Moore, 2021) extend this to L2 contexts, demonstrating how classroom interactions or digital spaces (e.g., during COVID-19) replicate or subvert dominant language ideologies.

LS in L2 Learning: Identity and Competence

The LS framework's application to L2 acquisition highlights the inseparability of linguistic and cultural learning. Duff and Talmy (2011) argue that L2 socialization entails "the appropriation of linguistic resources to negotiate membership in imagined communities" (p. 95), a process fraught with power asymmetries. For learners, this involves:

1. Contextualized Competence: Mastery of language forms tied to specific social or academic settings (e.g., classroom discourse genres) (Duff, 2019).
2. Identity (Re)construction: Negotiation of hybrid identities as learners navigate conflicting norms between heritage and target cultures (Kramsch, 2022).

Empirical work in immigrant and EFL settings (e.g., De León & García-Sánchez, 2021; Rymes & Leone, 2020) further reveals how macro-level ideologies (e.g., monolingualism) constrain learners' socialization, often marginalizing transnational identities.

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Language Socialization (LS) in Crisis Contexts

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted traditional LS pathways, forcing a rapid shift to digital environments where socialization practices were reconfigured. Prior research framed LS as a dual process of *socialization through language* (e.g., acquiring cultural norms via interaction) and *socialization to use language* (e.g., mastering communicative competence) (Ochs & Schieffelin, 2011). However, the pandemic's isolation necessitated novel forms of socialization, such as virtual peer mentoring (Dooly & Tudini, 2023) and asynchronous identity negotiation via multimodal platforms (Lu, 2024). Ethnographic studies of crisis contexts (e.g., Sabouri et al., 2024) reveal that LS adapts through improvised communities of practice, where learners scaffold one another in the absence of physical co-presence.

Attitude Evolution in EFL Learning

Learner attitudes—encompassing motivation, anxiety, and perceived value of the L2—are dynamic and socially constructed (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). Pre-pandemic LS research emphasized classroom interactions as primary attitude-shaping sites (e.g., teacher feedback rituals; Duff, 2019), but pandemic-induced remote learning decoupled attitudes from physical contexts. For example, Moore's (2021) ethnography of EFL learners in lockdown found that self-directed digital practices (e.g., TikTok language challenges) reduced anxiety and fostered positive attitude shifts by prioritizing playfulness over accuracy. This aligns with Kramsch's (2020) "ecological turn," which posits that attitudes emerge from learners' negotiated engagement with fragmented, multi-sited linguistic resources.

Empirical Studies on Language Socialization

Researchers have been able to contextualize their findings within specific spatial, temporal, and cultural frameworks due to the dynamic nature of community culture. The variations observed both between and within their research sites are integral to their analyses. For instance, in California and Texas, Schecter and Bayley (2002) have elucidated how Mexican families engage with and interpret cultural practices. They further explored how the use of Spanish, English, or a combination of both languages reflects the dynamic and fluid nature of cultural practices within these historical and sociocultural contexts. By demonstrating that the process of language socialization is extended over a lifetime and characterized by an interactive, multidirectional trajectory rather than a linear progression, this study highlights the evolving nature of LS. Thus, it addresses crucial issues related to power, agency, contingency, and multidirectional influence (Talmy, 2008).

McBrien et al. (2009) investigated the phenomenon of online learning within higher education. The authors conducted a survey involving 62 students to assess their attitudes toward their synchronous online learning experiences, particularly concerning learner structure and independence. They concluded that students generally found their online learning experience enjoyable; however, they expressed a sense of loss regarding the non-verbal cues typically present in traditional classroom settings. The findings indicated that while some learners experienced enhanced self-esteem and self-confidence, others encountered feelings of

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insecurity stemming from technical difficulties and an overwhelming amount of materials. Therefore, it is crucial to understand how students navigate these contemporary learning environments through language. Accordingly, the present study aims to raise awareness among learners and educators regarding the challenges encountered in online courses through LS (Cabi & Kalelioglu, 2019).

More recently, Evişen et al. (2020) conducted a review of the attitudes of EFL University introductory class students toward online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in Turkey. The researchers randomly selected six participants, who were asked to maintain journals for a duration of two weeks, followed by interviews conducted via Zoom after the completion of the online module. The findings indicated that the majority of students did not find their online learning experience satisfactory, expressing a desire to return to traditional classroom settings as soon as the threat of COVID-19 subsided (Okwumabua, et. al., 2011). During the lockdown, both teachers and students needed to develop strategies for navigating the learning process. This study provided insights into learners' attitudes toward online education; however, it did not address how teachers can effectively engage with students through language during these challenging times.

Additionally, Hafner and Yu (2020) explored the utilization of tools such as MS Word to facilitate LS processes among participants. Their research employed ethnographic observation of a team comprising law students and instructors preparing for an international high-stakes advocacy competition. The results demonstrated that the collaborative writing process plays a crucial role in socializing mooters into methodologies for conducting legitimate research and formulating and presenting arguments. The findings underscored that socialization is discipline-specific and can significantly influence the culture of particular sub-disciplines. Although this research represents a valuable contribution to the field of LS, there remains a need for further studies within the English language domain as a contemporary medium for EFL learners.

Language Socialization (LS) in traditional classroom settings typically occurs through structured, face-to-face interactions where learners acquire linguistic and cultural norms via direct observation, imitation, and scaffolded feedback from teachers and peers (Ochs & Schieffelin, 2017). These settings emphasize embodied communication (e.g., gestures, tone) and institutional hierarchies (e.g., teacher-student roles), which shape learners' sociolinguistic competence. In contrast, LS in online environments is mediated by digital tools, altering key dynamics: asynchronous communication may delay corrective feedback, while multimodal platforms (e.g., video calls, forums) create hybrid spaces for code-switching and identity performance (Thorne et al., 2015). The absence of physical co-presence in cyberspace reduces access to nonverbal cues but expands opportunities for transnational LS, where learners navigate diverse lingua franca norms (Sauro & Zourou, 2019). This comparison underscores the need to theorize LS in digital contexts as distinct from—yet interconnected with—traditional settings. Whether asynchronous or synchronous, online learning has become an essential component of modern education due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Administrators, educators,

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and students from traditional schools and in-person classrooms have transitioned to online platforms with remarkable speed. Unlike previous pandemics in history, the current crisis has led to an unprecedented global expansion of online lessons (Evişen et al., 2020). Consequently, there exists a notable lack of empirical research on LS, particularly concerning its impact on the EFL learners' attitude amid the COVID-19 pandemic. To address this research gap, researchers aimed to investigate how socialization into a new language and culture can influence EFL learners' perspectives, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic in Iran.

In response to the challenges posed by the coronavirus pandemic, researchers employed online ethnography (Reeves et al., 2013) to gather data from online classes. While a plethora of research exists on ESL learners (Talmy, 2008), the present study distinguishes itself from previous research by integrating three specific areas of inquiry: second (foreign) language socialization, EFL learners' attitudes, and the COVID-19 pandemic. This study aimed to analyze how EFL learners' attitudes shifted through LS and how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the LS experiences of Iranian EFL learners via cyberspace platforms (such as Skype and WhatsApp), serving as an opportunity for asynchronous interaction with their teachers and peers. Consequently, researchers sought to address the following research questions:

1. How does Language Socialization (LS) in a new cultural context shape Iranian EFL learners' attitudes toward language acquisition, particularly in terms of motivation, identity, and perceived linguistic competence?

2. What changes in Language Socialization (LS) strategies have Iranian EFL learners adopted in cyberspace due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and how have these shifts influenced their language learning attitudes and practices?

Method

Research Design

Currently, the world is still grappling with the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic. Under these circumstances, traditional classroom instruction has become untenable. Educational systems are adapting by creating alternative modalities for teaching and learning in response to these challenges. Consequently, this study employs the principles and methodologies of online or virtual ethnography (Reeves et al., 2013). This contemporary approach allows researchers to gather data from a variety of online sources, including texts, chat rooms, forums, and virtual communities. Similar to traditional ethnographic methods, it aims to provide a comprehensive depiction of the online life of a community or culture.

Participants

The intended participants of this study were adult learners of the English language enrolled in an English institution in Sabzevar, Iran. In this investigation, samples were selected using the convenience sampling method, which is classified as a non-probability sampling technique. Factors such as geographical proximity, willingness to volunteer, and availability at specific times were particularly relevant to the selection process. This approach supports the

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identification of the target population in alignment with the objectives of the research (Dörnyei, 2007).

The data presented herein are derived from a broader study examining language socialization theory and politeness strategies within an English institution over the course of an academic year. Due to space constraints, the analysis is limited to a concise overview of five EFL students. In qualitative research, Yin (2003) advises that a limited number of participants allows for a more comprehensive analysis of each case.

Regarding potential ethical considerations (e.g., the recognizability of participants), all names associated with individuals and institutions have been replaced with pseudonyms.
 (See Table 1).

Table 1

Demographic Information of Participants

No.	Name (pseudonym)	Gender	Age	Education
1.	Ali	Male	16	Mathematics Student
2.	Milad	Male	20	Medical Student
3.	Mohammad	Male	19	Computer Engineer Student
4.	Sara	Female	19	Management Student
5.	Fatemeh	Female	17	Student of Humanity Science

Setting

This ethnographic study focused on an English institution referred to as "Andishe Sazan" (pseudonym). Ethnography, characterized by its prolonged engagement within a specific setting, necessitates a comprehensive description of the study's location. Blommaert and Dong (2010) assert that one of the primary objectives of ethnographic research during the preparation phase is to understand and examine the potential contexts in which the research subject will be situated.

The educational setting in which the present study was conducted was an English institution. Such institutions, which are not regulated by the Ministry of Education, have the autonomy to select any curriculum they deem appropriate. Students are required to pay tuition fees. It is imperative for educators to be well-versed in contemporary teaching methodologies. In contrast to public and non-profit schools, these institutions utilize textbooks authored by native English speakers.

Class No. 2 comprised two sessions, each lasting one hour and thirty minutes. The dual objectives of this class were to enhance students' understanding of English grammar and vocabulary, as well as to develop their four language skills. The instructor primarily delivered the course content in English.

The instructor employed a systematic approach in accordance with institutional guidelines. The procedure included: (a) initiating a discussion question related to the reading topic, which students responded to in English; (b) inviting students to summarize the reading via Skype; (c) listening to an audio file and engaging in question-and-answer activities in English; (d)

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addressing grammatical issues with examples shared through WhatsApp; and (e) requesting students to complete assigned tasks. Figure 1 illustrates the typical flow of the English language class.

Figure 1

A summary of the English class and its routine
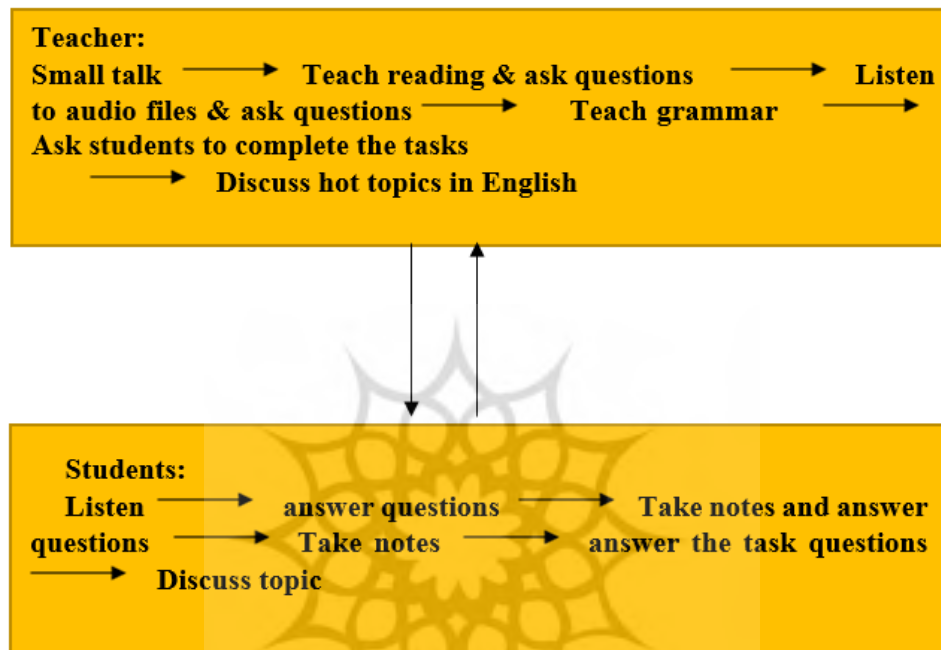
Instruments

This study employed an ethnographic approach to investigate language socialization processes, utilizing multiple data collection methods to ensure comprehensive analysis while maintaining methodological rigor. The research instruments were carefully selected to address both the fluid nature of socialization (Duff & Talmy, 2011) and the need for scientific validity and reliability.

Semi-structured interviews served as a primary data source, allowing researchers to adopt an emic perspective (Roulston, 2010) and co-construct realities with participants (Copland & Creese, 2015). The validity of interview data was established through triangulation with other data sources, member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and researcher reflexivity. Reliability was ensured through standardized protocols (Creswell, 2002).

Classroom Observations formed the core of ethnographic data collection. Validity was enhanced through prolonged engagement and thick description (Vu, 2021), while reliability was maintained via inter-rater verification (Jackson, 2015) and a structured observation framework.

Researcher Field Notes provided real-time documentation of classroom dynamics. These notes achieved validity through immediate recording to prevent memory decay and inclusion

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of contextual details (Emerson et al., 2011). Peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and regular reflective journaling enhanced reliability by minimizing subjective bias.

Audio Recordings of all classroom sessions preserved authentic interactions for analysis. Validity was ensured through verbatim transcription paired with contextual annotations, while reliability measures included secure digital storage and independent transcription verification (Rowlands, 2021).

Learner Journals offered reflexive insights into the socialization process, structured to engage higher-order cognitive skills (Le & Nguyen, 2024). Journal validity was established through guided prompts and triangulation with other data, while reliability was maintained via consistent instructions and longitudinal analysis of entries (Wagenaar, 2014).

Data Collection Procedure

The data were collected over the course of an academic year using multiple methods to triangulate findings and provide rich descriptions of the phenomena under investigation (Hine, 2000). This involved the implementation of participant observation, student journals, semi-structured interviews, and the researcher's field notes. Initially, researchers conducted observations of an EFL class for approximately 144 hours. During these observations, researchers focused particularly on teacher-student interactions concerning both academic and non-academic topics, while also engaging in member checking and triangulation.

Subsequently, the participants documented their reflections in English regarding the classes they attended, resulting in a total of 72 reports. These weekly reports encompassed general questions related to their classroom activities, class participation, and reflections on their experiences, observations about peers' participation, and broader thoughts and concerns regarding their studies.

To facilitate the reporting process, researchers provided participants with guiding questions. Participants primarily submitted their reports via email to one of the research team members. Feedback was given, along with further inquiries, making the reporting process highly interactive and yielding multiple layers of valuable data. Additionally, learners were encouraged to maintain journals in which they reflected on and analyzed the instruction provided by their teacher. This reflection and analysis were required to incorporate the learners' personal experiences and observations.

Then, researchers conducted four interviews with the participants at various intervals via Skype. While the students' journals continuously documented their immediate experiences, the semi-structured interviews, conducted every three months in Persian, allowed them to engage in more retrospective reflection on their practices. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. Additionally, researchers recorded all sessions for subsequent analysis. After transcribing and translating each interview, researchers examined the data to formulate the following questions.

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Ultimately, researchers generated several notes regarding the teacher-student interactions and the teacher's behavior in socializing with learners during each session. Over the course of the academic year, researchers observed these two classes for approximately 144 hours, audiotaping the majority of the sessions and taking detailed notes during and after the observations for later reflection (see Table 2).

Table 2

Summary of the Database

| Method	Data Collection Period (September 2020- May 2021)	Data
Participant Observation	Ongoing	One EFL class 144 hours
Students' Journal	Ongoing Once per week	Total of 72 reports Once per week Additional email messages, face-to-face/telephonic conversations between the participants and the researcher
Semi-Structured Interview	Interview1. Beginning of the academic year Interview2. After three months Interview3. Three months later Interview4. End of the academic year	Audio-taped Skype interviews Transcribed and translated by the researcher About 30 to 45 minutes
Researcher's Notes	Field- Ongoing	Twice per week Audiotaped and written

Data Analysis Procedures

Researchers employed the Direct Qualitative Content Analysis (DQCA) method as proposed by Mayring (2014). In accordance with this method, researchers delineated the theoretical framework and articulated the research question. The data were transcribed verbatim for qualitative content analysis. As recommended by Creswell (2014), the researcher used MAXQDA software (MAXQDA Analytic Pro 2020) for performing coding and thematic analysis of the data. Sentence was selected as the unit of content analysis, and manifest content, but not latent content, was accepted for analysis. The inductive approach of content analysis was used because the codes, categories, and themes were elicited entirely from the data, and no priori/established framework or model existed for performing content analysis (Berg, 2001). Gao and Zhang's (2020) five steps of doing qualitative data analysis were applied: (1) *cleaning the original data*: the researcher checks and modifies the data for any inaccuracy, language error, repetition, or irrelevant data; (2) *coding the data*: the researcher carefully reads the data to create open codes; (3) *generating themes*: the researcher categorizes the generated open codes into relevant sub-themes or axial codes; (4) *categorizing themes*: the researcher categorizes sub-themes or axial codes under higher-order general themes or selective codes; and finally, (5) *producing the report*: the researcher prepares a vivid and detained account of the finalized data analysis process and its interpretation.

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To ensure trustworthiness and credibility of the obtained codes, 20% of them were checked by an external coder who was a university lecturer and expert at doing qualitative data analysis in applied linguistics. For the whole data, a total of 130 codes were generated, 26 codes of which were examined by the second coder, who had disagreement with the first coder regarding 9 codes. This resulted in an inter-coder agreement coefficient of 92.5%. The two coders jointly discussed the points of divergence in their coding and made some modifications to a few codes, and in this way, finalized the coding system in this study. Furthermore, memos were utilized to articulate and document assumptions and hypotheses regarding relationships or significant findings within the data (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019). For an in-depth discussion of the inter-coder agreement procedure utilized in this study, refer to Kuckartz and Rädiker (2019). Ultimately, researchers identified 45 codes during the preliminary analysis. Following multiple revisions of these codes, researchers extracted two main categories and eight sub-categories. To visually present the finalized coding system, Figure 2 was created through the MAXMAP properties in MAXQDA.

Figure 2
A MAXMAP of the Coding system in MAXQDA Analytic Pro 2020
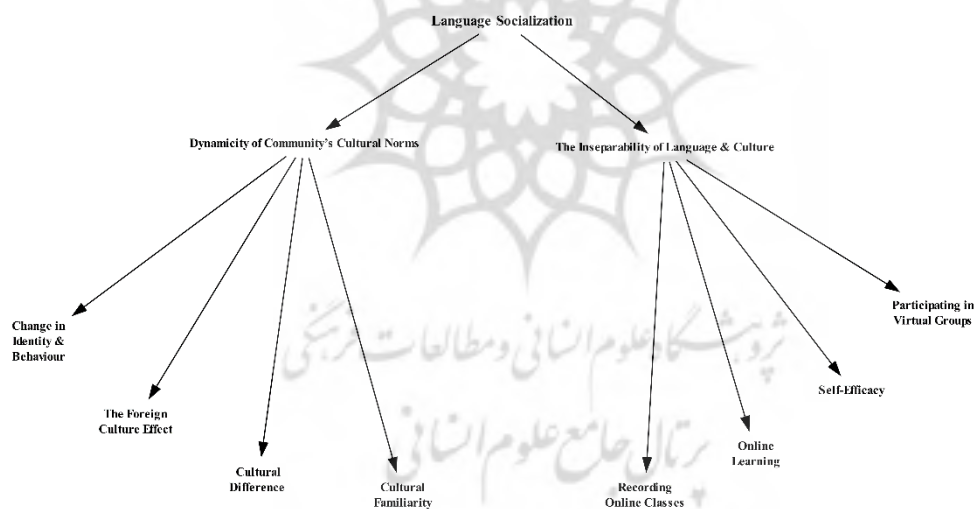
Results

The comprehensive analysis of multiple data sources - including systematic classroom observations, audio-recorded interactions, semi-structured interviews, detailed researcher field notes, and reflective learner journals - has yielded significant insights into the complex relationship between language acquisition and cultural socialization. Our findings robustly support the theoretical position that language and culture are fundamentally interconnected systems (Diep et al., 2022), with each dimension continuously shaping and being shaped by the other throughout the language learning process.

The research reveals that as Iranian EFL learners develop English language proficiency, they simultaneously engage in a parallel process of cultural acquisition and negotiation. This

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dual process manifests most clearly in learners' engagement with authentic English-language media, including films, literature, and digital narratives. These cultural artifacts served as powerful socialization tools, with one participant noting in their journal: "Through watching British television series, I began to understand not just the language, but the humor, social norms, and unspoken rules of English communication." Such materials provided learners with contextual frameworks that extended far beyond grammatical competence, facilitating their enculturation into Anglophone communication patterns and cultural practices.

However, this process of cultural-linguistic socialization does not occur in a vacuum. Our data clearly demonstrate that learners' native Persian linguistic and cultural frameworks significantly mediate their engagement with English. This mediation produces both facilitative and inhibitory effects. On one hand, participants frequently reported that certain Persian cultural norms, particularly those concerning appropriate classroom behavior and gender roles, initially constrained their participation in communicative activities. As one female participant explained during an interview: "In our culture, it's not common for girls to speak loudly or interrupt, so I found it very difficult to participate in fast-paced English discussions." On the other hand, some learners developed metacognitive awareness of these cultural-linguistic intersections, with several journal entries reflecting thoughtful comparisons between Persian and English communicative norms.

The longitudinal nature of our ethnographic approach allowed us to document how sustained exposure to the English language and culture gradually reshaped learners' perceptions of both their target language and their native linguistic-cultural identity. This phenomenon of identity negotiation and reconstruction emerged as a central theme, with many participants describing evolving, hybrid identities that incorporated elements from both cultural systems. Importantly, the valence of these changes - whether perceived as positive or negative by learners themselves - appeared closely tied to the degree to which new cultural knowledge could be meaningfully integrated with existing identity frameworks.

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent shift to online learning created a unique context for examining digital language socialization. Our findings indicate that virtual learning environments offered several distinct advantages for EFL learners. Most notably, the asynchronous nature of many online interactions and the ability to review recorded materials appeared to reduce affective barriers, with 72% of participants reporting decreased anxiety in online versus face-to-face settings. As one learner noted: "I could prepare my answers carefully before speaking in the online forum, which made me feel much more confident." The permanent, reviewable nature of digital interactions also provided valuable opportunities for reflective learning and self-paced progress monitoring.

However, detailed classroom observations revealed significant limitations in online interaction patterns. While teacher-to-student communication remained robust, peer-to-peer interactions decreased markedly in quantity and quality. The typical online session was characterized by what we term "serial monologue" - a pattern of sequential teacher-student

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exchanges with minimal horizontal interaction between learners. This finding suggests that while digital environments may facilitate individual language development, they present challenges for the social dimensions of language acquisition.

Discussion

This study addressed each research question in accordance with the principles of LS by Lee and Bucholtz (2015). Therefore, to clarify the relationship between the main categories and subcategories, researchers constructed Table 3.

Table 3

A Summary of the Main Categories and Subcategories of LS

RQs	Principles of LS Theory (Lee & Bucholtz, 2015)	The Data's Emerging Subcategories
RQ1	The Inseparability of Language & Culture	Cultural Familiarity Cultural Difference
RQ2	Dynamicity of Community's Cultural Norms	The Foreign Culture Effect Change in Identity & Behaviour Recording Online Classes Online Learning Self-Efficacy Participating in Virtual Groups

RQ1: The Inseparability of Language and Culture

Research question one examined how Iranian students altered their attitudes toward language acquisition through LS within a new cultural context. To address this question, researchers focused on a key principle of LS: the inseparability of language and culture. Researchers posited four fundamental constructs under this principle: cultural familiarity, cultural difference, the effect of the foreign culture, and changes in identity and behavior.

Cultural familiarity

Higher levels of familiarity enhance individuals' interest in acquiring knowledge about cultural artifacts, thereby increasing their engagement and interest in the culture from which these artifacts originate (Kim et al., 2018). From the perspective of the learners, their instructor facilitated their understanding of English culture and language through the use of social media and English-language films. Consequently, they expressed a heightened interest in learning about both English culture and language. Furthermore, their instructors assist them in clarifying the distinctions between their native language and English culture.

The learning process extends beyond the mere acquisition of subject matter within the classroom. In certain instances, educators engage in discussions regarding cultural contexts, thereby enhancing our familiarity with both the culture and the language in question. For instance, our instructor elucidated various customs that are not prevalent in our own society, which heightened our awareness of that particular culture. Such insights are invaluable, as they

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prepare us for potential future experiences, whether in the context of immigration or international travel, mitigating the likelihood of cultural shock (Ali, Interview).

Acquiring proficiency in the English language has facilitated my understanding of English culture, as my engagement with the language has predominantly occurred through narratives and cinematic representations. Prior to this exposure, I held a limited perspective regarding English and possessed minimal knowledge or comprehension of its cultural nuances. However, through the consumption of literature and films, I gradually cultivated an awareness of English culture. My interactions with English culture led me to perceive it as possessing attributes that I regarded as superior to those of my own upbringing (Sara, Students' Journal).

Cultural differences

Cultural difference is not a static phenomenon but rather a relational construct that continually evolves in meaning. Consequently, the L2 learner should not be perceived as a homogeneous cultural group devoid of agency; rather, they are active agents who participate in the exchange of information on their respective topics within competing debates (Kubota, 1990). L2 learners, educators, and researchers function as both consumers and creators of cultural meanings. It is essential to acknowledge that the specific purposes attributed to cultural differences emerge from a complex web of discourses and are not inherently political (Kubota, 2004).

Due to the presence of diverse cultures, understanding many narratives at first glance can be challenging, necessitating the need to consult definitions of specific words. Often, the thematic essence of a story remains elusive, complicating initial comprehension. This phenomenon presents difficulties, as it is generally more effective to infer the meanings of words within the context of a narrative before seeking precise definitions. Initially, I found this process quite challenging; however, as I engaged with more stories, I became increasingly familiar with the culture, facilitating a better understanding. In my cultural context, women tend to experience a degree of social isolation, often relegated to subordinate roles in relation to men. This cultural dynamic has substantially hindered language acquisition. For instance, in our English language classes, the activities and oral presentations can be particularly daunting and intimidating for female students (Sara, Interview).

The effect of foreign culture

Language and culture are intrinsically linked (Alsamani, 2014). Different cultures exhibit distinct practices that often reveal linguistic challenges. Additional disparities may encompass etiquette, rituals, values, norms, and systems (Al-Qahtani, 2003). Engaging with a diverse array of cultures is particularly important for individuals learning a foreign language (Gobel & Helmke, 2010). Incorporating cultural content into language teaching materials for English language majors is essential for fostering students' comprehension of the target culture. This

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approach also enhances students' awareness of their own cultural backgrounds and facilitates the attainment of communicative competence (Cheng, 2013).

Iranian culture can pose challenges to the acquisition of the English language and its associated cultural understanding, as certain practices that are commonplace within the target society may conflict with our own cultural norms. Emulating these practices could result in difficulties within our own societal context. The process of language learning inherently involves cultural immersion; thus, the dissonance between the target cultural values and our own can complicate the learning experience (Fatemeh, Students' Journal).

Change in identity and behaviour

Culture is a fundamental aspect of conceptualizations LS (Dao, 2022). The findings indicate that LS is a culturally bound phenomenon, intricately linked to the cultures and languages of the respective contexts (Dabou et al., 2021; Galante, 2020; Saleeem & Deeba, 2022). Furthermore, the study revealed that cultural factors negatively impacted the acquisition of the new language and culture, with learners expressing a preference for assimilating into the new culture, which they perceived as a prestigious culture and language (Osalbo, 2011).

It is posited that language acquisition is intrinsically linked to cultural understanding. As individuals attain greater fluency in foreign languages, they simultaneously enhance their appreciation of diverse cultures, thereby fostering a reciprocal relationship between language and cultural identity. Consequently, the process of learning a language can significantly influence one's identity, cultural perceptions, and behaviors, and vice versa. More broadly, it can be asserted that language has the potential to reshape aspects of one's personality (Milad, Interview).

Cultural socialization is the process through which novice agents of socialization acquire knowledge of culture and develop a sense of belonging to a specific cultural group (Umaña-Taylor & Fine, 2004, cited in Wang et al., 2015). The findings of this study align with those of Dillon et al. (2020), indicating that what is deemed socially acceptable in one culture may not be acceptable in another, which can complicate the process of learning a new language.

This study aimed to assist teachers and learners in recognizing and understanding these cultural differences and their impact on English language acquisition. The embedded meanings within English literature and films can facilitate EFL learners' assimilation into the new language and culture. This issue underscores the interdependence of language and culture and its influence on LS. These findings are consistent with the assertions made by Al-Amir (2017) in his research. Language and culture are inherently interconnected, and educators should take this relationship into account when teaching English (Morita, 2009). Consequently, the inseparability of language and culture in LS is substantiated by our findings.

RQ2: The Dynamicity of a Community's Cultural Norms

In the second research question, researchers investigated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the LS of Iranian EFL learners within the realm of cyberspace. To address this question, researchers concentrated on another fundamental principle of LS, specifically the dynamicity of the community's cultural norms. This section examines three significant constructs: online class recording, online learning self-efficacy, and virtual group participation.

Online class recording

Online learning emerged as a critical modality for continuing education during the pandemic, particularly within the context of higher education. In the past two decades, numerous global institutions have adopted online learning frameworks (Mahyoob, 2020). However, a significant number of schools, colleges, and universities have yet to fully implement this mode of education, and many staff lack awareness regarding the components and methodologies associated with e-learning. In light of the unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 outbreak, the transition to online learning became the sole viable option for sustaining educational continuity.

The instructor conducted both online and in-person classes, allowing for flexible attendance by students. Class materials were archived and subsequently distributed to students. The instructor provided notes and pamphlets, alleviating any concerns regarding access to these resources. Additionally, all relevant information was communicated to us by the instructor. Furthermore, the classes were recorded, enabling us to review the content at our convenience (Fatemeh, Student Journals).

In the realm of cyberspace, when classes are conducted online, educators are required to document the topics addressed during face-to-face interactions. The availability of recorded videos enables students to revisit class material multiple times. For instance, if students are unable to attend class due to various reasons, they may miss critical content. Additionally, this format facilitates student participation in sessions at any time throughout the day. Furthermore, it generates a repository of instructional materials that can be utilized in subsequent years (researcher's note).

Online learning self-Efficacy

Four factors contribute to self-efficacy in the online learning context: previous success with online learning, pre-course training, instructor feedback, and online learning technology anxiety (Ghory & Ghafory, 2021). As observed and reported by the participants in this study, they experience a sense of relaxation and possess high self-efficacy in online classes.

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented various challenges; however, it has also facilitated opportunities for language acquisition, particularly in English. With traditional classes being suspended and face-to-face interactions diminished, individuals have the opportunity to engage in language practice with increased self-confidence. This shift in learning modalities allows for a more comfortable environment in which to develop English-speaking skills, thereby

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reinforcing the positive correlation between self-confidence and language proficiency (Sara, Interview).

Participating in virtual groups

Virtual education can serve as an alternative approach for educators and learners to facilitate the continuation of learning. The substitution of in-person interactions with online virtual instruction may significantly influence students' experiences and levels of engagement within the educational environment (Lee, 2020).

We established a WhatsApp group that facilitated communication in English, serving as a platform for instructional content related to our readings and observations. This group enabled us to leverage the experiences of others in the acquisition of the English language. Additionally, we incorporated channels featuring native speakers who assessed our speaking and listening skills through direct conversation. Such interactions were instrumental in enhancing our English language proficiency. Engaging with our classmates in these Telegram and WhatsApp groups allowed us to draw upon diverse experiences and further reinforce our language skills (Mohammad, Student's Journal).

The instructor greeted each student individually. During online classes, students transcribed the content presented by the teacher. The instructor recorded an audio file and shared it in the WhatsApp group, encouraging students to leave audio messages to enhance their speaking skills. Subsequently, she elucidated the tasks and requested that students read the text. The teacher provided guidance and elaborated on a series of terms pertinent to the lesson. Most activities and speaking tasks were conducted within the classroom by the instructor. To date, there have been no observed interactions among students during online classes (observation).

The findings related to the second question, which investigated the impact of online classes on EFL LS during the COVID-19 pandemic, indicated that students found these classes enjoyable and experienced an increase in self-confidence. Participants reported feeling more at ease in virtual courses, as they were not burdened by the necessity of creating written materials, such as pamphlets. Additionally, they appreciated the flexibility of accessing the teacher's audio recordings at their convenience. Nevertheless, it was observed that student interactions during virtual classes were limited, with a predominant focus on teacher-led instruction. Learners were engaged in socializing and strategizing how to adapt to this new educational context. Given that this was an unprecedented situation for both the instructor and the students, it is inappropriate to categorize the teacher as an expert and the students as novices; instead, both roles were context-dependent, with individuals exhibiting expertise and novice characteristics as dictated by the circumstances.

This study aligns with Lam (2004) regarding the efficacy of LS through digital tools during the COVID-19 pandemic. Learners employed a diverse array of linguistic forms, symbol systems, and orthographies from their first language to construct hybrid texts, thereby reflecting and performing their hybrid linguistic identities and investments (Hafner & Yu, 2020; Thorne et al., 2009). However, our findings contrast with those of Murphy et al. (2020), whose study

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indicated that students experienced emotions such as uncertainty, anxiety, and nervousness in online classes. In contrast, our results suggest that learners, in the absence of face-to-face interaction, reported increased confidence and reduced stress, corroborating the findings of Assi and Rashtchi (2022).

This study demonstrated that learners could adapt to this new educational context with the support of their instructor. This finding aligns with the research conducted by Rodríguez-Fernández et al. (2018). Online classes presented numerous challenges for learners, including the navigation of new applications, reduced opportunities for group interaction (Bączek et al., 2021; Singh & Thurman, 2019), and issues related to internet connectivity (Agung et al., 2020; Bączek et al., 2021; Bao, 2020). Nevertheless, students reported that they no longer experienced a sense of lag in their learning, as they had access to recorded video lectures and instructional materials prepared by the teacher, leading to a positive perception of online learning. This finding is consistent with the work of Bishaw et al. (2022) and Mohammed (2022).

Additionally, participants reported a reduction in stress levels due to the absence of face-to-face interactions, a trend particularly evident among female students. Consequently, they expressed a preference for online learning; however, there is a need for increased proficiency in new technologies. Ultimately, both educators and students have engaged in socialization and adaptation to the current circumstances.

Consistent with Moghadam and Shamsi (2021), our study affirms that technology-mediated learning during COVID-19 enhanced EFL learners' motivation and self-efficacy. While they demonstrated this through Facebook's collaborative features, our ethnographic data revealed similar benefits across broader virtual communities, suggesting that engagement—whether via social media or structured online classes—mitigates pandemic-induced disruptions. However, our findings diverge in emphasizing cultural identity shifts—a dimension overlooked in their sociocultural theory (SCT) framework. Where SCT focuses on interaction (e.g., Facebook's collaborative potential), our LS lens uncovers how learners internalize cultural norms in cyberspace, illustrating that crisis-era socialization transcends tool-specific effects.

Like Shojaei and Salari (2021), our ethnographic approach revealed subtleties often missed in quantitative studies—whether in public health compliance (e.g., 'ignored dimensions' of quarantine) or educational adaptation (e.g., identity shifts in EFL learners). This reinforces ethnography's value in crisis contexts where human behavior defies simplistic categorization. While Shojaei and Salari (2021) highlight systemic failures in public health policy (e.g., 'lack of administrative support'), our work zooms in on individual and cultural adaptation within EFL education. Together, these studies illustrate how crises amplify both structural vulnerabilities (their focus) and agentive resilience (our focus)—a duality critical for holistic pandemic response frameworks.

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Conclusion

Based on data gathered from classroom observations, audio recordings, semi-structured interviews, researcher notes, and learner journals, the findings of this study indicate that language and culture are inextricably linked (Diep et al., 2022). As learners acquire proficiency in English, they simultaneously engage with its associated cultural context. The utilization of English media, narratives, and films proved advantageous in integrating EFL learners with both the language and its culture. Nonetheless, the learners' native culture and first language significantly influence their socialization within the English linguistic and cultural framework. Consequently, the process of socialization into the English language and culture may alter learners' perceptions of the Persian language and culture over time, yielding both positive and negative outcomes. These effects are contingent upon whether the new cultural experiences contribute positively to their overall personal development. Additionally, the results indicated that digital tools offered a substantial context for LS during the COVID-19 pandemic. From the perspective of LS research, digital devices are particularly valuable due to the permanent records they create.

The findings also indicated that learners experienced greater enjoyment in online classes, as they reported a reduction in feelings of awkwardness and anxiety, leading to increased confidence due to the absence of face-to-face interaction. However, observational results revealed that meaningful interactions between teachers and students were limited in the online format, with a predominance of teacher-directed discourse. In conclusion, the results demonstrated that online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic were beneficial for English learners, as they provided the opportunity for students to save class sessions and review them at their convenience. To ensure a clear and reader-friendly conclusion, researchers will summarize the main points below:

1. English culture is prominently reflected in its narratives, cinematic productions, and various forms of media.
2. L1 and cultural background of Iranian learners adversely influence their socialization within the context of the English language and its associated culture.
3. Learners socialized to the established norms of online classroom conduct during the COVID-19 pandemic.
4. The levels of anxiety and stress experienced by learners diminish, while their self-confidence in online classes increases.
5. The opportunities for meaningful interactions among learners are reduced in online class environments.

This study suggests that researchers could apply LS theory within the EFL and ESL contexts. Additionally, it highlights the necessity for researchers to become proficient in conducting online ethnographies within digital environments. Furthermore, EFL educators and learners should recognize the impact of cultural meanings embedded in various media, including films,

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narratives, and literature. Materials developers are also encouraged to consider the influence of language and culture on the socialization process in their materials.

Implications and Recommendations

The theoretical implications of this study suggest the need for an expanded model of Language Socialization that explicitly accounts for the digital mediation of socialization processes, bidirectional cultural influences in EFL contexts, and the role of identity negotiation in language acquisition. On a practical level, the findings offer several applications: educators should intentionally scaffold cultural content through curated multimedia materials, while curriculum designers ought to develop hybrid learning models that combine the affective benefits of online learning with opportunities for face-to-face interaction. Additionally, materials developers should create resources that explicitly address cultural-linguistic interface issues, and researchers are encouraged to adopt innovative digital ethnography methods to capture the full complexity of online language socialization.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides rich qualitative insights into the evolving Language Socialization (LS) practices and attitude changes of Iranian EFL learners, its findings are based on a small sample of five participants. This limited sample size, though conducive to in-depth longitudinal analysis, restricts the generalizability of the results to broader populations. The challenge of recruiting and retaining participants for long-term studies—particularly due to the COVID-19 pandemic's disruptions and learners' fluctuating availability—further constrained the sample. However, the study's qualitative design prioritizes *depth* over breadth, aligning with its exploratory aim to uncover nuanced processes of LS and attitude transformation in a cyberspace context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Future research could expand on these findings by incorporating larger, more diverse cohorts or mixed-methods approaches to balance depth with generalizability.

Duff and Talmy (2011) emphasized the need to explore socialization across the lifespan in more diverse, multilingual, multicultural, and transnational environments, as well as through multiple modalities, such as face-to-face and computer-mediated communication. While this study concentrated on learners, incorporating the perspectives and experiences of teachers would be advantageous. Further case studies at the individual level and across various groups and contexts are essential to elucidate the differences both within and between groups. Additionally, the identification and testing of LS patterns across different temporalities and time intervals will necessitate further quantitative research and experimental designs (Matsumura, 2001). Given that the ethnographic foundations of LS make the use of such methods less common, addressing new questions and providing innovative approaches to past issues can enhance existing methodologies.

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