# Hidden Curriculum in Internet-Enhanced English Education: The Representation of Iranian Social Actors in BBC Learning English Program

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## Abstract

Recent years have witnessed drastic enhancements in English language teaching (ELT) especially due to the Internet. Although the literature is well-documented with regard to the positive effects of Internet application in English education, the critical investigation of Internet-mediated ELT sources has rarely been dealt with. In this study, one of the four most favorite Internet-based English programs in Iran and throughout the world (Karimi Alavijeh, 2014), namely, the BBC Leaning English, was investigated in terms of the way it represented Iran. For this purpose, qualitative content analysis was used to extract the main themes of this program and an adapted version of Van Leeuwen's (2008) Social Actor Network was utilized for the critical discourse analysis of the resulted corpus. The extracted themes, the recognized social actors, and the way dif-

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ferent discursive mechanisms and hypertextual techniques had been used to represent them in unfavorable manners unfolded the presence of hidden agenda in a supposedly English learning program.

**Keywords:** hidden curriculum, adapted version of Van Leeuwen's Scial Actor Network, Iran, BBC Learning English, Internet-enhanced English language teaching

## Introduction

Enthusiasm for the use of the Internet in English education has highly increased in recent years due to its provision of unrivaled potentials and diverse facilities. Some of such facilities include access to constant education, meeting the huge demand for education by reaching a large number of people at any one time, the low cost of Internet-mediated and distance education compared to campus learning, the growing ubiquity of the Web, increasing public familiarity and daily use of the Internet, access to huge information sources, quick information transfer, attractions of multimodal learning, and active collaboration of learners with their peers and teachers (Karimi Alavijeh & Marandi, 2014).

Parallel with the immense advancements of cyber education, critical perspectives with respect to such matters as pornography, intellectual property rights, cyber bullying, privacy, security, digital citizenship rules, libel, digital crimes and language distortion (Berne et al., 2019; Crystal, 2003; Karimi Alavijeh and Abdollahi, 2018; Minjeong & Dongyeon, 2018) are also growing. Such concerns are essential for ELT, particularly because of "the big share that the Internet has in teaching English to a wide population of learners, and in providing a variety of tools and materials both for English teachers and learners, for classroom learning as well as for cyber education and individual learning" (Karimi Alavijeh & Marandi, 2014, p. 125). Nevertheless, critical analyses of the content of Internet-enhanced ELT materials in terms of the ideological values they include and spread have rarely been conducted. Such critical studies are both relevant and imperative since the Internet has a high potentiality for disseminating Western values (Anbarian, 2009; Jordan, 2013; Le'vy, 2001), especially those of English speaking countries, throughout the world (Anderson, 2004; Castells, 2001; Reeder, Macfadyn, Roche & Chase, 2004).

Taking this need into account, and keeping in mind the long history of British global hegemony and the sensitive relations of Iran and Britain, especially during the past 40 years after the Iranian Islamic Revolution (Shoeibi, 2016), we found it quite relevant to explore if there are new relations of power in the pretext of British Broadcasting Channel (BBC), formed through ELT (hidden) curriculum. This was addressed through the investigation of *BBC Learning English program*, which has proved to be one of the four most popular websites among the Iranian and non-Iranian English teachers (Karimi Alavijeh, 2014).

Special features of digital pages on the web like audiovisual elements, hypertextually interrelated materials, transient as well as permanent contents, and other hyper features have made the analysis of web-based materials com-

plicated. One way to approach this content is breaking it into slices and setting some criteria for the analysis of only particular sections or features so as to achieve manageability, transparency, deep investigation and thick description (Kim & Kuljis, 2010). This was addressed in the present research, on the one hand, through using particular key words for the selection of content, and, on the other hand, through delimiting the study to verbal, rather than audiovisual, content.

For this purpose, the content of this website was analyzed through *critical discourse analysis,* using the keyword "Iran" and its related lexical items such as "Iranian, Persia" and "Persian" as the criterion both for the selection of the materials among the huge bulk of the website content, and as a benchmark to learn how Iran is represented in this website. To keep the trace of the discursive mechanisms which were in charge of these representations, an adapted version of Van Leeuwen's (2008) social actor network was applied to the corpus. This network along with other related issues from the literature will be described in the following section.

## Review of Literature
### Hidden/Other Curriculum

Suggested by Jackson (1968, p. 5), "hidden curriculum" proposes that education is basically a "social process," which is addressed through schooling without being part of the formal curriculum. As a behind-the-scene program, the principles and components of a hidden curriculum have their origins in the ruling system to which a particular educational program affiliates itself. As such, the hidden curriculum is a means through which the ruling system exercises its power over people and their thoughts, and it is intentionally hidden to "preserve the hegemony of the powerful over the social strata" (Margolis, 2001, p. 3).

Hidden curriculum was reintroduced by Freire (1973) in *the Pedagogy of the Oppressed* where he elaborated on multiple facets of suppressive power in education. It was relabelled as the "other curriculum" (Margolis, 2001, p. 3)—rather than *formal, overt* curriculum— and as "null curriculum" in that it nullifies "any perspectives that question the capitalist project" (Einser 1985, pp. 97-98). Some "resistance theorists" like Apple (1982) and Giroux (1981) argue that hidden curriculum is both natural and necessary for socializing students (Margolis, 2001, p. 16). They declare, however, that the presence of a hidden curriculum should by no means mean that students are denied of their active role in making personal decisions, and that it is the educators' responsibility to uncover how the curriculum "reproduces structures of power and oppression" (Margolis, 2001, p. 16). This idea was revived by Freire (1973, 1982, 1994) who believed that students "negotiate, accommodate, reject, and often divert socialization agendas" (p. 16).

The idea of a hidden curriculum was originally concerned with the schooling process (Martin, 1983), but it expanded itself to include concepts such as class,

gender, language, and race biases latent in educational materials and policies in higher education (Margolis, 2001). In English language teaching (ELT), there is extensive literature on different aspects of hidden curricula present in the field, especially in authoring, publishing, and disseminating English course books throughout the globe (e.g., Ehrensal, 2001; Kumaravadivelu, 2018; Pennycook, 1994; Phillipson, 1992, 2009; Spring, 2009) and presenting them as unquestionable (Progler, 2011; Spring, 2009). Uncovering the hidden agenda in ELT has revealed how global systems of power disseminate particular ideologies through globalized English education, particularly through English course books produced in core countries and publicized throughout the world (e.g., Heiman, 1994; Pennycook, 2007a, 2007b). Accordingly, ELT critical thinkers draw attention toward the efforts that some Western countries have made throughout history to establish their dominance over the world, be it conquering the lands of non-English-speaking people and taking the control of their educational and cultural centers (Adaskou et al., 1990; Asraf, 1997; Canagarajah, 1999), dominating their culture, history, thinking system, and lifestyle (Karimi Alavijeh & Marandi, 2019; Pennycook & Coutand-Marin, 2005; Phillipson, 1992, 2009) or characterizing and representing them in false, unrealistic manners (Canagarajah, 1999; Karimi Alavijeh & Marandi, 2014) mainly through English materials.

Although the contemporary literature is replete with critical studies which deal with various aspects of hidden agenda in commercial English course books, there is still a paucity of critical research on *Internet-enhanced* English materials. Some current issues regarding the internationally published course books related to this study include: the favorable representation of the US and British life style in English course books (Gray, 2000; Holme, 2003; Pratt et al., 2018); the key role of English textbooks produced in core countries in spreading their culture (Aliakbari, 2004; Cunningworth, 1995; Kakavand, 2009; Kazemi et al., 2017; Kilickaya, 2004; Rahimi & Yadollahi, 2009; Rezaeifard & Chalak, 2017); failure of commercial English course books to attract learners because of their incongruity with their social values and language needs (Brown, 2001; Canagarajah, 1999; Dendrinos, 2001; Poursadouqi, 2012; Sadeghy, 2008); emphasis on the need for inclusion of learners' local cultures (Chen et al., 2011; Cortazzi & Jin, 1999; Kasaian & Subbakrishna, 2011) or the inclusion of international cultures (Bashir, 2011; Kiss & Weninger, 2013; McKay, 2003; Naji & Pishghadam, 2012) in English textbooks. The content of Internet-enhanced English educational materials, however, has been subject to few studies in recent years, which will be introduced in the following section.

## Internet-Enhanced English Education

As the greatest innovation in information technology, the Internet has offered new opportunities to language learners and teachers that have never been preceded by other technologies. The benefits and uses of the Internet for education are growing with every passing day and its immense potentials are widely discussed in the educational literature. Generally, the Internet can serve three

main functions: as "a source of information, a place for collaboration, and a place to learn and publish" (Tafani, 2009, p.94). The "non-linear," (Levy, 1997) huge information on the Web provide a rich source of authentic, human experience; something even more than a "virtual library" (Lee, 2000).

In addition to these advantages, the Internet can particularly be helpful for English teachers due to such possibilities as the permanent provision of up-to-date content—leaving no fear of the teaching materials becoming outdated, offering various authoring packages which allow instructors to create their own exercises and to supplement existing language courses, relieving teachers from the trouble of direct teaching and thus allowing them to closely monitor students' learning, and bringing an ingredient of fun, innovation and amusement into English teaching environments. As a result, Internet-mediated instruction has received special attention in English education, since, beside the privileges that it offers to other fields, the Internet simply introduces a huge asset of English materials and educational tools that can be handled with relative ease by English learners and teachers—compared to students of other majors—due to their knowledge of the English language.

The literature about the Internet-mediated language teaching is well-documented and vast with regard to its positive effects on language learning and teaching (Clyde & Delohery, 2004; Ducate & Lomicka, 2008; Fayyazi, 2007; Lee, 2008; Nami & Marandi, 2013; Richardson, 2006, Warschauer, 1996) online testing and assessment (Roever, 2007; Weber & Able, 2003; Wolf, 2001), online communication (Lamy & Hampel, 2007) intercultural communication (Farshadnia, 2010; Kim & Bonk, 2002), interactive competence (Chun, 1994), culture learning (Hofstede, 1991), promoting a social constructivist account of culture (Kim & Bonk, 2002), interlocutors' interpretation of each other's behaviors on the Web (Frank et al., 2004), online intercultural communication models (Belz, 2002; Byram, 1997), fostering EFL learners' intercultural competence (Liaw, 2006) and many other issues.

Despite its triumphant presence in English educational settings, the Internet has some drawbacks, and adopting an uncritical, utopian view towards this instrument may make its use simply disadvantageous. The critical investigation of education via the Internet is growing, especially on topics like cultural stereotyping on the Web (Anakwe et al., 1999), Anglo-American dominance on the Web (Reeder et al., 2004; Yang, 2010) and the threat of the Web to self-identity (Anbarian, 2009), and to the security of nations (Kilroy, 2008).

In ELT, critical standpoints are growing in recent years. Hegemonies in computer assisted language learning (CALL) and the illusion of democratic Internet in ELT settings were recently highlighted in few studies (Lamy & Pegrum, 2012; Marandi, 2017; Marandi et al., 2015). More specifically, in their analysis of *Englishcentral* and *VoA Special English for Persian learners*, Karimi Alavijeh and Marandi (2014, 2019) uncovered aspects of political and cultural agenda of ELT materials on the Web. Although the new critical movement seems promising, more critical inspection of hidden curricula present in Internet-enhanced ELT, as it will be explored in this study, is still an urgent need.

## Van Leeuwen's Social Actor Network

Van Leeuwen (2008, p. 6) defines discourse as the "social cognition, of a socially constructed knowledge of some social practice, developed in specific social contexts, and in ways appropriate to these contexts." Since discourses are established via social cognitions, they include in them resources for representing social practices and are, therefore, the best sites to study the overt and covert facets of social practices as manifested in language/texts. Hence, it is both logical and possible to "reconstruct discourses from the texts that draw on them" (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 6).

Van Leeuwen (2008) highly emphasizes the difference between social practices, as the core of human behaviors, and their representations in language. In doing so, he uses Bernstein's (1981) concept of "recontextualization," which was originally introduced in relation to educational practices, and was also adopted and applied by other critical discourse analysts like Fairclough (2003) and Wodak (2001). Bernstein (1986, p. 5) believed that "the upper reaches of the education system" actively produce knowledge and then embed it into a pedagogic content in the "lower reaches" to serve the contextually defined purpose of a "discourse of order" (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 7).

Van Leeuwen's method makes use of recontextualization analysis to highlight the kinds of "transformations that the original practice undergoes when it is represented within, and from the point of view, of another practice" (Walko, 2009, p. 220). This is, in fact, an "analytical backtracking process" (Walko, 2009, p. 220) where participants and the activities they are engaged in are called "*social actors"* and "*social actions",* respectively by Van Leeuwen *(*2008, p. 23*).* This makes up systemic networks that elaborate on how social actors and actions are represented through the lexicogrammar of a text. His framework and methodology aim to outline a sociological grammar of representation in discourse, in which critical analysis of particular modes of representation is related to their specific grammatical and rhetorical realizations in texts (Van Leeuwen, 1996).

Van Leeuwen (2008) developed his analytical model of social representations inspired, on the one hand, by Foucault's (1972) concept of discourse as a "semantic construction of reality," which has a social and historical function (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. vii). On the other hand, he drew mainly on Halliday's (1978) concept of "register" referring to the semantic aspect of language, and his theory of transitivity (1985), but departed from them in his focus on the *sociological* as opposed to the *linguistic-functional* aspect of the analysis, in  correspondence with the contexts of situation.

Unlike many other researcher attempting to conduct critical discourse analysis, Van Leeuwen does not build on linguistic operations, such as nominalization and passive agent deletion, or on linguistic categories, such as the categories of transitivity, but instead he "draws up a sociosemantic inventory of the ways in which social actors can be represented" (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 23). The systemic network he devised for analyzing the ways through which social actors are represented in discourses is an effective device for analyzing a varie-

ty of discourse types including ELT ones. In this study, this network is expected to help the researchers explore how Iranian social actors are represented in BBC Learning English program.

## Method
### Corpus

The corpus of this study was taken from *BBC Leaning English* which is a program inside BBC online, including a myriad of video/audio-enhanced materials for English reading, writing, speaking and listening skills. It provides free English learning materials which are mostly suitable for learners around intermediate level, and fall into categories of *general* and *business English*; *grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation; quizzes; for teachers* and the like.

To collect the data, the keyword "Iran" and its related lexical items were searched on this website and 69 excerpts including this word were found. An important point about the BBC Learning English program is its hypertextuality (Albu & Etter, 2016; Levy, 1997); it is not an independent section, rather, it is closely linked with other parts of BBC website. Searching BBC for the keyword "Iran," for instance, results in 22,434 instances displaying all results for this word throughout BBC, including, of course, the Learning English Program, as Figure 1 illustrates. The search for the same keyword in the BBC Learning English program results in the English educational materials along with links to other parts of BBC website such as the News, Sports, and the like, as shown in Figure 2. The comparison of these two figures reveals how the materials in the English learning program overlap with the content of other parts of the website. The arrows in two figures show that the main difference between the two figures is the change in the place of "Learning" and "Editor's Choice." In other words, English learners are just one click away from other-than-English-learning programs on BBC, which are developed based on its particular perspectives. For manageability and impartiality concerns, however, this study is limited to the analysis of materials derived from the English educational program.

## Instrumentation
### *Van Leeuwen's Social Actor Network (SAN)*

Due to its social perspective, Van Leeuwen's SAN was assumed to suit the purpose of this study in that it does not start out from linguistic strategies; rather, it is concerned with how social actors can be represented (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 23). In SAN, the term "social actor" is used to refer to the "participants" of social practices (p. 23) and a variety of discursive strategies responsible for different representations of social actors are extensively introduced. SAN initially determines if the social actors involved in a social practice are included ("inclusion") in or excluded ("exclusion") form a particular discourse (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 29). In the latter case, two further discursive mechanisms
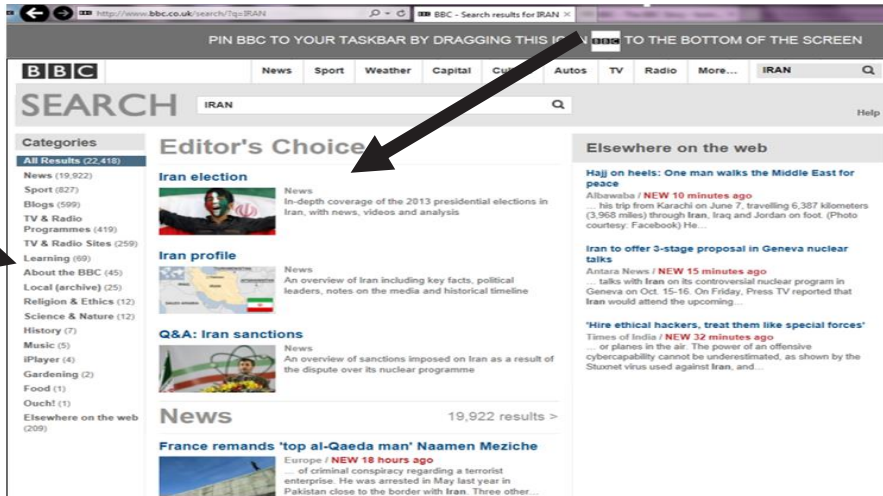
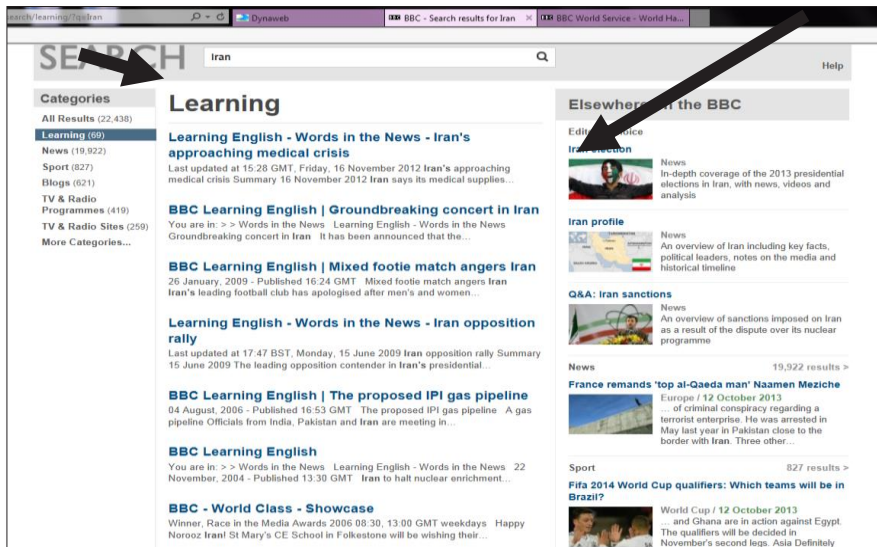***Figure 1.*** Search results for the keyword "Iran" in BBC website



***Figure 2.*** Search results for the keyword "Iran" in BBC Learning English website

can be realized, namely the "suppression" which refers to absolute deletion of social actors along with their practices, and a "less radical" type of exclusion called "backgrounding" which pushes a social actor back from the immediate context but retrieves it elsewhere in a "deemphasized" form (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 29).

The *included* social actors may be represented through 46 main discursive mechanisms to which their subcategories must be added. To analyze the data of

the present study, however, only two sets of discursive mechanisms were used for two reasons: 1. They were recognized to be used most frequently in our data; 2. They had the most descriptive and explanatory power regarding the research data. These mechanisms were dichotomies of *association* versus *dissociation*, and *activation* versus *passivation* which are defined and exemplified through BBC Learning English samples in the following discussions.

### Association versus Dissociation

According to Van Leeuwen (2008), *association* has to do with linking social actors together to form a society or group without being labeled as such. The following excerpt from BBC Learning English is illustrative:

> 1. *In recent months the country has faced a number of major challenges from outside its borders.... First, there was the American-led attack on neighboring Afghanistan, and the subsequent stationing of western forces there in Iran's backyard. Then, Tehran was bracketed, along with its old enemy Iraq, and North Korea....*

In this example, Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq, and North Korea make up an unlabeled group, with the alliance formed only in relation to a particular context without remaining true in all situations. This is an instance of what Van Leeuwen (2008) calls *association,* where a number of social actors are represented as interacting in relation to specific activities without forming an "established, institutionalized" group (p. 39).

Probing deeply into the data, it was found that *association* was realized not only in relation to social actors, but also in relation to some *attributes* and *actions* as well. This led the researchers to apply an adapted version of Van Leeuwen's model proposed by Karimi Alavijeh (2014). As a result, the former meaning of *association* offered by Van Leeuwen, henceforth called *type I association,* along with the latter meaning of association, henceforth called *type II association*, which takes attributes and actions into account, were used in parallel. This would enhance the descriptive and explanatory power of the instrument. Another example from BBC Learning English can clarify the point:

> 2. *Ordinary people complain that rents have doubled.... Recently, a number of Iranian administrations have toyed with the idea of raising the price of subsidised petrol, or rationing supply...*

In the above excerpt, it is observed that there is no association between "ordinary people" or "administrations" and any other social actor(s). However, associations can be recognized between the Iranian people and the action of complaining against high rents as well as between Iranian administrators and the "toying with the idea of raising the price of subsidised petrol," which are both instances of type II association with actions.

In addition to actions, devising a new category with attributes as the central point of association has two reasons: First, attributes are by nature different

from actions, behaviors, utterances and mental effects (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). Second, there are many attributes in our data, linked systematically to particular social actors, which make them a rich source for data analysis. Attributes address one of the following functions: 1. They "characterize" a social actor via linking him/her to a quality such as being clever, deceitful, etc. 2. They "identify" a social actor through identity-related features like people's job, nationality, religious sect, and the like (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p. 215). These two functions are generally analyzed under the social actor's attributes in the present study. Social actors can be associated explicitly or explicitly as summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1.**
*Social Actor's Association Types*

| Social Actor | Explicit | Implicit |
|---|---|---|
| Type I: Social Actor | | |
| Type II: Action/Attribute | | |

Similarly, the definition of *dissociation* needed some modifications due to the nature of our data. Van Leeuwen (2008) defines dissociation as the "unformation of groups" formed throughout a discourse. In other words, dissociation is the outcome of the break-down of a former association. In our data, however, dissociation did not rely on association as its precondition; social actors could be represented in dissociation from one another regardless of the presence or absence of any former association. Drawing this demarcation line was more significant when the data was not contextualized enough to keep the trace of former associations, like in brief excerpts. For this reason, *type II dissociation* (Karimi Alavijeh, 2014), as opposed to *type I dissociation* introduced by Van Leeuwen, was included. Moreover, there were many instances of *dissociation* where social actors were denied of any contribution to particular *actions* and *attributes.* For such instances, type III dissociation (Karimi Alavijeh, 2014) was used. The following examples can illuminate the point:

> 3. *As with almost any topic, differences are apparent, given the intense state of factional rivalry between reformists and hardliners.*

Here, the two Iranian political factions, are plainly dissociated for their "intense state of factional rivalry" which is an instance of type II dissociation.

> 4. *The United States is opposed to the project [of exporting Iran's gas to India] because of the financial and strategic benefits it would give to Iran...*

Example 4 includes *type III dissociation* where the US is explicitly dissociated from the financial and strategic benefits obtained by Iran. Table 2 offers a summary of *dissociation* types:

**Table 2.**
*Social Actor's Dissociation Types*

| Social Actor | Explicit | Implicit |
|---|---|---|
| Type I: Social Actor | | |
| Type II: Social Actor | | |
| Type III: Action/Attribute | | |

In the course of the present study, although *association* and *dissociation* types were able to explain the relations among social actors and their actions/attributes, they failed to locate the active or passive position of social actors toward one another, or toward the actions and attributes. This need was met through the application of another pair of discursive strategies, namely *activation* and *passivation* in Van Leeuwen's model, as will be elaborated in the following discussion.

### *Activation versus Passivation*

*Activation* is the strategy of representing a social actor as a "dynamic force" of a social practice while *passivation* places a social actor at the "receiving end" of it (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 33). In this study, *activation* and *passivation* could explain the research data in several cases when it was impossible to explain them via other discursive mechanisms. For example, in such cases as the *increase of drug prices, drastic decrease of the value of the Iranian currency, low public sector pay,* and the like, it was evident that there exists some relation between the Iranian people and/or government and these issues, but association-dissociation strategies failed to explain them since they were neither actions performed by the Iranian people/government nor their attributes/actions. Here, *passivation* strategy could explain how Iranian people/government were represented as *target* to those inconveniences (*passivated*), with the government almost always represented as being responsible for those hardships. The following example is illustrative:

> 5. *Dollar reserves are running out and even though some sanctions were eased in October to allow in some drugs, the currency crisis has made it near impossible for Iran to buy them.*

Here, the Iranian people/government are *passivated* for being the target of sanctions, and the UN and US are *activated* for imposing the sanctions. Similar to *association* and *dissociation*, *activation* and *passivation* could be applied not only to social actors but also with regard to *attributes* and *actions.* Accordingly, *activation* and *passivation* of social actors were referred to as *type I*, while *type II* was used when attributes and actions were involved (Karimi Alavijeh, 2014).

**Table 3.**
*Social Actor's Activation and Passivation*

| Social Actor | Activation | Passivation |
|---|---|---|
| Type I: Social Actor | | |
| Type II: Action/Attribute | | |

## Procedures

To collect the data from BBC, the keyword "Iran" and its related lexical items such as "Iranian, Persia" and "Persian" were searched on this website. Interestingly, 22,434 results were found consisting of texts and videos including these keywords, with the *News* entry triggering the largest number, i.e., 19,912 results. Since we were concerned with the English educational program of this website, we saved only the data which appeared in *English Learning* section which were 69 units including the word "Iran" in audio, video or text type. The transcripts of the video/audio files were also available except for a few cases which were transcribed by the researchers. Moreover, the close examination of the data revealed that the word *Iran* was used in this program to refer to two groups of Iranian social actors, namely, the Iranian people and the Iranian government/officials. Due to this finding, all discursive mechanisms pertinent to Iran were informed by these three groups of social actors throughout the analyses which are as follow.

### Content Analysis

In a process of qualitative content analysis, the obtained data were tentatively coded during an initial "open coding" process (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 12). The resulted codes were reexamined for the most outstanding codes in a process of focused coding which resulted in recognizing the main categories. This was followed by "axial coding" (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 13) which compared and revised the categories and subcategories. Eventually, the main themes were extracted out of the unified categories. The themes were put in the context of lessons again to check if they actually made sense and finally the main themes were determined to be:

- Economic hardship in Iran
- Restrictions imposed on the Iranian people by their government
- Iranian people's oppositions against their Islamic government
- Conflict between two political factions in Iran
- Iran's security and foreign relations
- Pursuing education in the UK

To ensure the consistency of themetization and categorization (Saldana, 2009), the researchers analyzed the corpus a second time after a two-month interval. This yielded 89.2% of interpretive convergence. In addition, 20% of the whole data was analyzed by another rater who was an expert in content analysis. This resulted in 80% of interpretive convergence.

### Critical Discourse Analysis

The adapted version of Van Leeuwen's Social Actor Network (2008) was used to explain the associations and dissociations, as well as the activation and passivation strategies present in the data. All excerpts including the word "Iran"

and its related lexical items were critically analyzed and remarkable results were obtained. To save space, however, a few samples within the recognized themes are discussed in terms of the aforementioned discursive mechanisms.

It is noteworthy that the researchers analyzed the corpus a second time after a two-month interval to ensure the consistency of the critical discourse analysis (Saldana, 2009). This yielded 90.25% interpretive convergence. Moreover, 20% of the whole data was analyzed by an expert discourse analyst. This resulted in 80.02% of convergence.

- **Economic hardship in Iran**

    *Iran says its medical supplies are due to run out in two months' time. The Iranian authorities say drug prices have gone up by 350% since this time last year. Western imposed sanctions on Iran have affected the lives of those who live there.*

Borrowing Van Leeuwen's term (2008, p. 46), one can say that this excerpt starts with an "utterance autonomization" strategy, that is the substitution of the utterance for its sayer when the utterance is a survey, report, news, etc. On the one hand, the particular social actors responsible for the news are not nominated, and, on the other hand, a superficial validity is given to the news through citing it from the Iranian sources. In this excerpt, Iranian people are *associated* with "running out of drug supplies" and "sanctions." In addition to being target to the scarcity of drugs and sanctions, the Iranian people are also *passivated* for being subject to the increase of drug prices. The title of this message in BBC is "Iran's approaching medical crisis" which is in itself another *association* made between the Iranian people/officials and this so-called crisis.

- **Restrictions imposed on the Iranian public by their government**

    *. . . All music performances in Iran have to be approved by the Ministry of Islamic Guidance which vets the lyrics and disapproves sometimes of the style of the music if it's seen as too western or decadent.... Despite those restrictions, over the last few years Iranian pop music has become more and more westernised. In a taxi you'll often hear house or rap music with lyrics in Farsi. There are still no videos—dancing is completely banned—and western groups are rarely if ever heard on radio or TV. . . Women are still not allowed to perform as solo singer.*

*Suppressing* the Islamic ideology underlying the banning of certain types of music as well as dancing, and women's solo singing, this passage attributes all these restrictions to the Iranian Ministry of Islamic Guidance. The examples provided from the taxi drivers listening to "house and rap music" and the westernization of the Iranian pop music suggest a divide between the Iranian offi-

cials and the people in that the former bans what the latter approves. This is also an implicit association of the Iranian government officials with biased rules, and the Iranian public with being suppressed.

With regard to *activation/passivation* mechanisms, Iranian people, especially the women who are not allowed to perform solo songs, are passivated as targets to the government restrictive rules, and the Iranian governmental officials are activated for exercising those rules. Iranian people, however, are activated for resisting the so-called restrictive rules in that they have westernized their pop music, and listen to the lyrics disapproved by the Ministry of Islamic Guidance.

- **Iranian people's opposition to their Islamic government**

  *A smaller rally is in progress in Tehran University, being addressed by Mr Mousavi's wife Zahra Rahnavard. She's told students that the rally was cancelled because they were worried that the lives of those attending could be in danger. Reports from her rally indicate that paramilitaries are trying to break it up. Students are taking cover in a mosque.*

  *… I understand from sources close to Mr Mousavi that he was warned that the police and Basij militia had been given authorisation for the first time to use live rounds if the demonstration went ahead.*

The above excerpts make associations between the Iranian government, the police, paramilitaries, and Basij militia, dissociating them from the demonstrators, students, opposition leader, Mr. Mousavi, and Mr Mousavi's wife, Zahra Rahnavard. Most of the social actors associated together to support the government are also attributed military features, suggesting an unequal confrontation of an armed authority against unarmed people. The former group is also associated with banning opposition demonstrations, having the authorization to use live rounds, threatening the lives of demonstrators, and trying to break up the demonstrations. The latter group is assigned associations such as condemning the presidential election result, cancelling the opposition rally for not receiving official permission, being warned not to confront the police and Basij militia, being worried that the lives of demonstrators might be in danger, and taking cover in a mosque**.**

Concerning *activation* and *passivation* strategies, the government and its associates are assigned the active role and authority, as it is evident in the above list of their associations. Not receiving official permission for the rally, and feeling worried that their lives may be endangered, the opposition group is in a passive position. It is only activated for being the dynamic force of a minor rally in Tehran University. Relying on our activation/passivation-based analysis we can observe that the discourse of this message is not only bipolar in that it represents a confrontational relation between a group of people and the government officials, but is also a portrayal of power relations assigning (military)

power to the government (activation) and a suppressed role to the public (passivation) despite the struggle and persistence of the latter to hold, at least, minor rallies (activation).

- **Conflict between two political factions in Iran**

  *Iran is celebrating the anniversary of the revolution which ousted the Shah and brought the current Islamic regime to power. But President Mohammad Khatami and his fellow reformists may feel they have little to celebrate.*

  *The annual rallies staged to commemorate the Islamic Revolution have become occasions largely for regime loyalists these days.... This year's celebration finds the Islamic revolution deep in crisis over next week's general elections. Many people saw the massive election victories of the reformists from 1997 on, as a sort of second revolution.... But powerful entrenched hardliners have made sure that the elected reformists have been able to achieve little for their years in office. People have become largely disillusioned and apathetic. The disqualification of more than two and a half thousand reformist candidates by the unelected right-wing Council of Guardians has been met by public resignation, or indifference rather than anger.... Hopes for peaceful change from within the regime have been dashed, at least for the moment. Few people want to see radical change brought about by violence and upheaval. They've seen enough of that....*

The verb "stage" in the second paragraph indicates that the anniversaries of the Islamic Revolution are arranged by the government or by "regime loyalists," without being a national occasion celebrated by all Iranians. Similar to the preceding samples, this piece of news creates a bipolar context in which the Iranian government, called the "Islamic regime" instead, is associated with its "loyalists, powerful entrenched hardliners, and unelected right wing Council of Guardians." On the contrary, the Iranian government is dissociated from "many people" as well as from "the reformists, President Mohammad Khatami, reformist candidates, and the Iranian people," with the latter social actors forming an association themselves. In fact, representing the commemoration of the Islamic Revolution as "an occasion for regime loyalists" dissociates them from the majority of the Iranian public. This itself implies the dissociation of the majority of the Iranian public from their government.

In addition, the reformists are described as "the elected" group while the right wing Guardian Council is described as "unelected." This deepens the association of the Iranian people with the reformists who "feel they have little to celebrate" on the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, and dissociates both of them from the Islamic Revolution and the right wing. This is also a negative representation of the Iranian government system which authorizes an "unelected" power to disqualify the presidential candidates of an "elected" faction.

All throughout these excerpts, the Iranian government officials of the right wing are associated with negative actions such as disqualification of more than two and a half thousand reformist candidates, and radical change brought about by violence and upheaval. They are associated with unpleasant attributes such as being "powerful entrenched hardliners" and "unelected" as well. Consequently, the Iranian people are explicitly associated with "becoming largely disillusioned and apathetic," as well as with passiveness, indifference, having no hope for peaceful change, and having seen enough of radical change brought about by violence and upheaval.

All the unpleasant descriptions along with the association of the Islamic government of Iran with "crisis and great uncertainty about what the future holds," and the wide gap as well as conflict between the two Iranian political factions display a dark picture of Iran as a whole. Generally speaking, the Iranian government and officials of the right faction are activated in this piece of news for their undemocratic rule, and the Iranian people and the reformist faction were jointly passivated for disappointment and frustration.

- **Iran's security and foreign relations**

    *Iran has accused the British government of insulting Islam by awarding a knighthood to the author of The Satanic Verses Salman Rushdie. In 1989, Ayatollah Khomeini, who was then leader of Iran, issued a fatwa, condemning the author to death. . . . What put Mr Rushdie in fear for his life was the order issued by Ayatollah Khomeini that he and all those involved with the publication of The Satanic Verses be put to death. . . The ruling by Ayatollah Khomeini led one Islamic foundation to put a bounty on Mr Rushdie's head. Soon afterwards, Britain and Iran severed diplomatic relations.*

Condemning Rushdie and "all those involved with the publication of The Satanic Verses" to death, leading "one Islamic foundation to put a bounty on Mr Rushdie's head," and severing Iran-Britain diplomatic relations are actions associated with Imam Khomeini, which, in the meanwhile, dissociate Rushdie and his cooperators as well as the British government from the government of Iran. In addition, all the above actions assign the Iranian officials an active role, which consequently places the aforementioned dissociated social actors into a passive position. The above-mentioned excerpt is likely to portray a harsh picture of the Iranian officials as well as Islam due to the repulsiveness of the death penalty. There are many other instances of describing Iran's foreign policy and security in relation with other countries like the US, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, North Korea, Palestine, Israel, and Iraq which will be reported in concise tables, to save space.

- **Pursuing education in the UK**

Although pursuing education in the UK was one of the main themes, no instances of discursive mechanisms could be found within the recognized ex-

cerpts due to the nature of its data. There is, instead, a large space in this program devoted to displaying the Iranian's tendency to leave their country to pursue their study in the UK and the advice and suggestions provided by BBC respondents are supplemented via referring Iranian English learners to other links. As it was mentioned in the *corpus* section, hyperlinks inserted into this program take learners far out of the English Learning program to other pages inside the BBC website (at a micro level) or out of that to websites other than BBC (at a macro level). Despite its having the claim of being simply an English educational program, this website plays an intervening role in the sense that it redirects its users to materials that are not related to English learning. Here goes one example:

> *And the first question is from Omid in Iran: How can I study in the UK? How can I pay for it?*
>
> *NB: The most important thing if you want to study overseas is to be absolutely clear what you want to study. Once you've decided that, you can have a look at the 50,000 or so courses available in the UK.*
>
> *. . . I suggest that one of the best ways of doing this is to look at a website called http://www.educationuk.org. . . There are a number of scholarships available to study, although nearly all of these depend on the individual student's academic ability...*

In the above excerpt, the BBC response redirects English learners to another website called educationuk.org, which is part of the British Council official website displayed in Figure 3. It consists of a variety of categories and subcategories, designed as micro and macro level hyperlinks, in order to provide information about pursuing education in the UK academic centers.
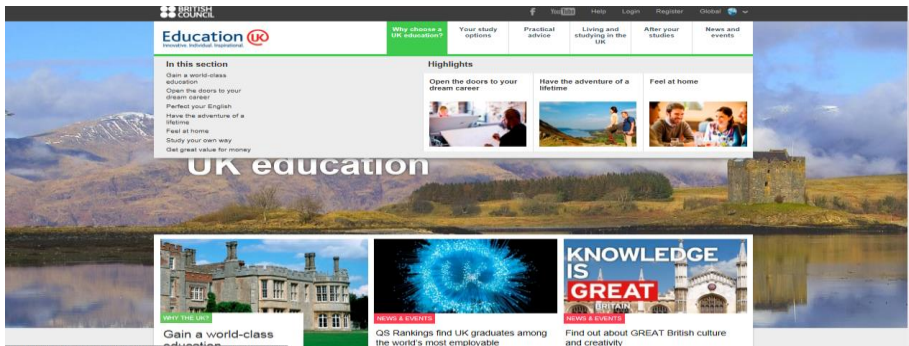


***Figure 3.*** The homepage of British Council's website

As illustrated in the screenshot above, the leftmost entry on top of this page forms the first page hyperlinked at a micro level, named as *Why choose a UK*

*education*. It introduces several advantages of education in the UK including the following entries as they appear in the vertical column to the left of figure 3: *Gain a world-class education, Open the door to your dream career, Perfect your English, etc.*

Generally, website users can use any of the entries within this website to enter a world of wide information about issues such as the qualifications demanded for studying in the UK, accommodations available for the students aged 16 or those under and above it, how of applying for student visas, living and studying in the UK, post-graduation agenda, entering a career, and the like, all in detail and in a persuasive manner. It is noteworthy that this promising picture of the UK comes along with unfavorable representations of Iran as displayed and exemplified above.

## Results

Using discursive mechanisms as a part of its hidden agenda, BBC Learning English represented Iranian people and government as opposite to one another in most cases. In addition, the reformist faction and its agents were associated with the Iranian people, while both of them were dissociated from the Iranian government/officials. This policy of creating a gap between the nation and the government was present all throughout this website materials. It is noteworthy that this so-called educational program represents both the Iranian people and government unfavorably which results in an unpleasant representation of Iran as a whole.

Samples of associations which are made with Iranian people and the Iranian government officials appear in Tables 4 and 5, respectively.

**Table 4.**
*Sample Associations with the Iranian People*

| Social Actor's Association | Explicit | Implicit |
|---|---|---|
| Type I: Social Actor | the reformists, President Mohammad Khatami, Mirhossein Mousavi, college students, demonstrators opposing the presidential elections results, etc. | — |
| Type II: Action | suffering from diseases, not affording to pay for the medicines, eventual death resulting from drug crisis and lack of medication in Iran, etc. | — |
| Type III: Attribute | angry with their government for petrol rationing, largely disillusioned and apathetic, passiveness, having no hopes for peaceful change, etc. | suppressed by the government |

**Table 5.**
*Sample Associations with the Iranian Government/Officials*

| Social Actor's Association | Explicit | Implicit |
|---|---|---|
| Type I: Social Actor | the police, paramilitaries, Basij militia, regime loyalists, powerful entrenched hardliners, clerics, unelected right wing Council of Guardians, Iraq, North Korea, etc. | hardline conservatives |
| Type II: Action | banning the western music, dancing, foreign musician's performance, and women's solo song; causing high unemployment, inflation, high rents, high costs of living; stifling freedom; using violence and upheaval, etc. | concealing the reality of Iran's economic problems from the Iranians, undemocratic rule, poor management, etc. |
| Type III: Attribute | being powerful entrenched hardliners, unelected, part of Bush's axis of evil, greatly uncertain about what the future holds, etc. | dishonesty, intense state of factional rivalry between reformists and hardliners, etc. |

The number of dissociations is less than associations in this program; the *Iranian people* are explicitly dissociated from their government named as the "regime" and from the "unelected right-wing Guardian Council." Dissociation divides are present between the *Iranian government* and several social actors as they appear in the following table:

**Table 6.**
*Sample Dissociations from the Iranian Government/Officials*

| Social Actor's Dissociation | Explicit | Implicit |
|---|---|---|
| Type I: Social Actor | — | — |
| Type II: Social Actor | reformist candidates, the Iranian people, Israel, hostile America, Rushdie, the British Government, the Shahs, etc. | economists, majority of the Iranian people, Afghan refugees |

Another facet of this unfavorable representation of both the *Iranian people* and *government* is activation of the Iranian government in relation to actions and attributes which indicates suppressing and restricting the Iranian people. The Iranian government, however, is passivated for being subject to Iranian's opposition rallies and their declaring of dissatisfaction. The latter group is naturally the active force of opposition rallies, and the passive side of the suppressions which are represented as being exercised by the Iranian government. Tables 7 and 8 provide a brief report on these two discursive strategies.

**Table 7.**
*Sample Activation and Passivation of the Iranian People*

| Iranian People | Activation | Passivation |
|---|---|---|
| Social Actor | the Iranian government, the conservative party, Ahmadinejad, etc. | the Iranian government, the conservative party, etc. |
| Action | resisting the socially restrictive rules exercised by the government, westernizing the Iranian pop music, holding a rally in Tehran University, creating disappointment and frustration in the government, etc. | dying as a result of not affording to pay for medicines, currency crisis, spiraling inflation, high rents, high unemployment, radical change brought about by violence and upheaval, etc. |
| Attribute | | being on the verge of a medical disaster; having short supply of crucial drugs, etc. |

**Table 8.**
*Sample Activation and Passivation of the Iranian Government/Officials*

| Iranian People | Activation | Passivation |
|---|---|---|
| Social Actor | the Iranian people; reformists; President Khatami and his fellow reformists, etc. | Western countries imposing sanctions on Iran, Iranian protestors |
| Action | exercise of socially restrictive rules pertaining music, threatening the lives of demonstrators, trying to break up the demonstrations, separating Iran from the world, suppressing the Persian civilization, stifling freedom, etc. | target to opposition rallies, resentment of Iranian people due to petrol rationing, ordinary people's complaints; future sanctions of petrol imports, loss of $32bn in oil revenues; etc. |
| Attribute | undemocratic rule; authorized to use live rounds, etc. | unable to import drugs because of currency crisis; subject to intense state of factional rivalry between reformists and hardliners, etc. |

Similar to association-dissociation, the activation-passivation strategies portray a dark picture of Iran where the Iranian people and government are in constant conflict, and the political and economic situation is disastrous. Iranian people are activated in relation to expressing their resentment with the government policies, and holding opposition rallies. They are, however, portrayed as being suppressed in most cases by the Iranian government portrayed as a powerful, authoritarian force. This provides enough justification for Iranian people's inclination to leave their country for the UK, about which abundant information has been provided.

## Conclusion

The most remarkable finding of the present study is the suspicious obsession of BBC's supposedly "Learning English" program with representing *Iranian* social actors. Our data analysis revealed that Iran appeared in this website in 69 excerpts to refer to two main groups: the Iranian people and the Iranian govern-

ment/officials. These two groups, as well as the main Iranian political factions, are displayed in constant conflict, leading to a harsh, provocative picture of Iran as a chaotic, unsafe, and isolated country.

In addition to using the discursive strategies such as association, dissociation, activation, and passivation, this website makes use of hypertextuality (Albu & Etter, 2016, Levy, 1997). This latter strategy comprises of the insertion of some hyperlinks within English excerpts, which makes it very easy to traverse between the websites that are predetermined by the BBC Learning English program. Hypertextuality is in close relation with the concept of *voice* in the sense that it reveals how some social actors are given a voice in a hypertextual discourse while others are deprived of this chance. In the sample excerpts of the BBC Learning English program, it was BBC News, educationuk.org and Chevening Scholarship websites which were given a voice. Although the keyword "Iran" was used to collect the data from this website, no hypertextual reference was made to Iranian websites, nor were any Iranian news agencies named as the source for the retrieved materials. This is while nearly all materials about Iran were *pieces of news*. News excerpts are typically characterized for being economically concise and very informative (Conboy, 2010; Fowler, 1991). As such, very brief pieces of news are able to convey a great deal of information from the perspectives favored by the particular news agency; which were definitely not Iran's formal news agencies. In other words, BBC "Learning English" legitimizes particular political views that are produced and endorsed by BBC news service agency. This purpose is best facilitated through inserting this "English educational" program in the midst of the major news service website of BBC.

Another significant issue is that this program has the claim of being simply educational, yet, as a part of its *hidden curriculum*, it conveys certain messages through its educational materials, internal hyperlinks, and close interrelation with the BBC News website. The abundance of such suspicious messages reminds of McPhail's assertion that long term exposure to alien messages sent by technologically-dominant countries helps "formation of a new mentality", which is to the detriment of individuals' perception of their indigenous identity and national sovereignty (McPhail, 1987, p. 18) and leads to distrusting domestic news and replacing them over time with messages produced in the West (McPhail, 2006). Consequently, the application of such materials for Iranian English learners and teachers can lead to the formation of the viewpoints promoted by BBC. Moreover, International English learners are likely to develop a negative attitude towards Iran due to their exposure to such unfavorable messages, disguised behind the neat label of free, Internet-mediated education.

This study also underscores the concerns of hidden curriculum, arguing that education has a formal and a hidden layer, and it is the responsibility of educators to draw attentions to hidden layers. "Sometimes even it is not necessary to show the hidden thing, but rather it is about helping the student to know that there are hidden things for him or her to discover" (Freire, 2007, p. 35). From this perspective, this research supports the findings of the critical analysis of published commercial ELT course books, in that they foster the promotion of

western culture as their hidden agenda (Chen, et al. 2011, Kakavand, 2009, Kazemi et al., 2017, Kiss & Weninger, 2013; Poursadouqi, 2012, Rezaeifard & Chalak, 2017, Sadeghy, 2008). So far, as far as Internet-enhanced ELT materials are concerned, findings of the current study are in line with the results obtained from the critical investigation of Englishcentral website (Karimi Alavijeh & Marandi, 2014) and VoA Special English for Persian learners (Karimi Alavijeh & Marandi, 2019) in that they uncover the hidden agenda in these alleged educational programs. Since stakes are very high in Internet-based ELT, the results of this investigation requires Internet-based English materials users, be it policymakers, curriculum and materials developers, teachers or learners, to raise their digital literacy skills and critical awareness of the potential threats of such materials for their indigenous values and beliefs.

Informed by the results of the present research, English educational authorities and policy makers can devise strategies to inform people about the implications and consequences of such programs. They can also invest in developing local, Internet-based, free English educational programs to be used in school mainstream education and private institutes. English teachers may think that Internet-enhanced English educational programs have made their job easier since learners can autonomously learn English, receive corrective feedback, and fine tune their learning on the Web. Also, they may feel relieved with the new teacher-assistance facilities that these programs provide such as classroom rosters, timetables, rubrics, progress reports, and ready-made tests. However, English teachers are expected to be aware and raise their students' cultural, political, and ideological awareness about the possible hegemonic goals of English education, and to exercise closer monitoring on their students' activities on the Web.

Another implication of the present study is for critical pedagogues and EFL researchers to apply CDA approaches to EFL contexts and materials. While the typical research methods in TEFL are empirical, mainly demanding treatments or longitudinal studies, CDA can produce significant results especially in the realm of course materials development and evaluation. In fact, ELT multimodal programs on the Web are a rich, rather untouched field, which need to be studied in terms of their written texts, audio-visual effects, and different aspects of hidden agenda such as politics, family and social values, culture, imperialistic and colonial ambitions, and many other aspects.

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