



# World English and World Englishes: perspectives from English language learners in Iran

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## ABSTRACT

The global spread of English has led to the emergence of non-native varieties of English in the world and this has, as a consequence, prompted many scholars to discuss and acknowledge World Englishes (WEs, i.e., non-native varieties of English) in addition to World English (WE; i.e., English as an international language). The present study set out to assess Iranian English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' attitudes toward WE and WEs using a questionnaire, adopted from previous relevant research, and focus-group interviews. The participants consisted of 38 EFL learners. The results revealed the remarkably positive attitudes of the participants toward WE but not toward WEs nor to "Iranian English" (i.e., "Expanding Circle"). The findings therefore indicated that Iranian language learners perceive the Standard English spoken in English speaking countries such as the US and UK (i.e., "Inner Circle") as the only legitimate reference group.

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## 1. Introduction

The wide global spread of English has fuelled discussions among a large number of researchers around the world regarding the repercussions, benefits, as well as the hindrances, if any, that this spread can or has already brought about. Kachru and Nelson (1996) maintain that the spread of English into the status of a global language can be viewed in terms of two distinct diasporas, an idea which was first proposed by Kachru (1992a). The first diaspora involved the diffusion of English from the mother country such as North America to new locations, while in the second diaspora those who had been trained in English were responsible for transmitting English to new contexts. The first diaspora, assert Kachru and Nelson (1996), occurred in the Inner Circle while the second diaspora was the case with the other circles and involved processes of nativization of English.

Numerous terms are used to denote the international status of English. These terms are employed in their singular and plural forms and include:

"English as an international (auxiliary) language, global English(es), international English(es), localized varieties of English, new varieties of English, non-native varieties of English, second language varieties of English, World English (es) (WE[s]), new Englishes, alongside more traditional terms such as ESL (English as a second language) and EFL (English as a foreign language)" (Bolton 2004, 367).

Specifically, WEs refers to "localized forms of English" which are used across the world (Bolton 2005 as cited in Xiao 2009, 421). English is now regarded as the international lingua franca. To conceptualize the global spread of English, Kachru (1985a, 1992a) introduced three circles: inner, outer, and expanding. According to Kachru, these circles correspond to the terms English as a native language, ESL, and EFL, respectively. Crystal (2003) provides the following well-known figure (Figure 1) to show the number of the speakers of English in each circle (p. 61).

Crystal (2003, 60) defines the three circles as follows:

- (1) *The Inner Circle*: Known as the "traditional bases of English, where it is the primary language," this circle includes such countries as the USA, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand;

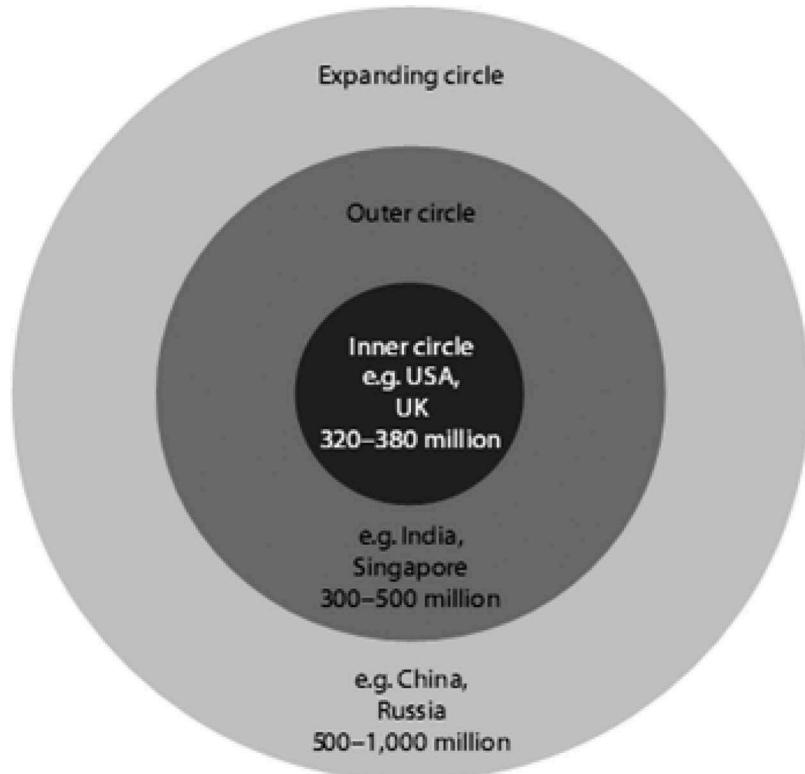


Figure 1. The three circles of English.

- (2) *The Outer Circle*: Also called *Extended Circle*, this refers to the countries in which English is used as a second language (ESL) and in which the main uses of English are for communicational, institutional, and official purposes. Examples include Singapore, India, and Malawi.
- (3) *The Expanding Circle*: Also termed *Extending Circle*, this refers to settings with no history of colonization on the part of the inner circle territories and in which English is used and taught as a foreign language (EFL). Examples include China, Japan, and Greece.

The present study is primarily motivated by the dearth of research studies on such an important issue as the global status of English and the attitudes toward it. Hopefully, the findings can be enlightening to scholars looking forward to hearing more of the views of students of English from an expanding circle context (i.e., one specific segment of the expanding circle), i.e., Iran.

## **2. Review of literature**

In recent years, the issue of the ubiquitous spread of English in the world, along with the ramifications of its evolution into many varieties, has been the focus of attention of a large number of researchers across the globe (Caine 2008; Canagarajah 2006; Groves 2009; Kachru and Smith 2008; Kirkpatrick 2007; Kirkpatrick and Deterding 2011; Seidlhofer 2004; Xiao 2009; Yano 2001; to name but a few). Further, whole volumes (e.g., Alsagoff et al. 2012; Kachru and Nelson 2011; Kachru and Smith 2008) as well as master theses and doctoral dissertations (e.g., Rousseau 2012; Yu 2010; Zhang 2010) have also been dedicated to examining the issue of English as an international language (EIL) and WE(s), demonstrating the significance of this research area for pedagogy, for both theorizing and practice.

Researchers have focused on WEs from a variety of perspectives. Jenkins (2006), for instance, examined the different standpoints adopted toward WEs and assessed the common position taken of the debate on native speaker (NS) versus non-native speaker (NNS) legitimacy. She concludes that NSs are viewed by many as the only legitimate reference group for English language learning. In similar fashion, Madrid and Cañado (2004) carried out a study of 459 students and 35 teachers of English in Spain, finding that the teachers favored native teachers while students' perceptions of native teachers became more positive as their academic level increased. Caine (2008) suggested that the development of English into an international language has necessitated a reexamination of the educational policies adopted within the international contexts. Caine also emphasized that researchers' recommendations in this regard have not been put into practice yet.

Non-native varieties of English have also received rigorous attention in the literature. Researchers have also anticipated the challenges that arise from the

existence of such non-native varieties in an international context. One case in point is the issue of mutual intelligibility. Yano (2001) suggested that, to work out the problem of unintelligibility, it might be helpful to use the English of those learners who speak it as a foreign language for the sake of international purposes. Yoshikawa (2008), for instance, carried out a study of intelligibility of the English of idiomatic expressions as spoken by diverse groups and nationalities as an issue that should be of considerable significance in international communication.

Groves (2009) investigated the status of what she termed, rather doubtfully, "Hong Kong English" (HKE) in light of three frameworks: Kachru's (1983) three stages (circles) of the development of English, Moag's (1982) "Life cycle of non-native Englishes," and Schneider's (2003, 2007) "Post-Colonial Englishes." She concluded that HKE does not still serve fully as a language *per se* and is in need of public recognition. In a similar vein, Zhang (2010, 223) examined Hong Kong EFL learners' attitudes toward localized varieties of English and native varieties of English. The results indicated a sense of solidarity toward educated HKE accent (HKed) although "there is linguistic self-hatred in the Hong Kong community." Similarly, Tan (2012) examined the status of Singapore English within the theories of Kachru's (1982) concentric circle model and Schneider's (2007) model of phases of development in postcolonial varieties of English. Considering such aspects as the major phonological, grammatical, and discoursal elements of Singaporean English, Tan (2012) concluded by mentioning some of the factors that need to be taken into account when investigating non-Anglo Englishes including the fact that features of learners' developing language result not only from interlanguage characteristics of language acquisition and the influence of other languages but also from the historical changes that have occurred throughout the history of their native language. As for the Iranian context, some studies of Iranian EFL learners' attitudes toward English and its varieties have indicated a strong preference for NSs over NSSs (e.g., Pishghadam and Saboori 2011). In another recent study, Askarzadeh Torghabeh (2007) called for the recognition of other dialects of English other than American and British accents. These studies are not enough, however, and further research is required in order to verify or repudiate previous results.

## **2.1. Research questions**

In addition to examining Iranian EFL learners' attitudes toward English, the present study aimed at investigating the possible effect of language proficiency (i.e., elementary vs. advanced) on the participants' attitudes. Therefore, the following research questions were addressed in the current study:

- (1) What are the attitudes of Iranian EFL learners toward English, the purposes for learning it, and the current English education policy?

- (2) Is there any significant difference between elementary and advanced EFL learners in terms of their attitudes toward English, the purposes for learning it, and the current English education policy?
- (3) Do Iranian EFL learners hold positive attitudes toward native and non-native varieties of English?

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Participants

The participants of this study were 20 Iranian elementary and 18 advanced EFL learners (only males; due to the researcher's lack of access to female participants), aged 15–27 studying English at a language institute in Iran. With regards to their ethnic and educational background, they consisted of Arabs, Persians, and Turks and were high school students. The participants constituted two classes which were selected randomly from a number of classes in a single-sex (male) English language institute. The demographic information of the participants is summed up in detail in [Table 1](#). The frequencies here show the number of the participants and the percentages were calculated out of the total number of the participants (i.e., 38). For instance, concerning having native English teachers, according to this table, while 3 participants (7.9%) said that they had native teachers, 35 others (92.1%) had not been taught by native teachers.

#### 3.2. Instruments

Two instruments were used to collect the data required for this study. First, a questionnaire, adopted from [Yu \(2010\)](#), was translated into Persian and

**Table 1.** The demographic information of the participants.

Variable	Variable components	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	38	100
	Female	0	0
Age	14–18	27	71.1
	18–27	11	28.9
Mother tongue	Persian	33	86.8
	Arabic	4	10.5
	Turkish	1	2.6
Education	High school (junior and senior)	38	100
	University (students/graduates)	0	0
Years of studying English	Less than 2 years	18	47.3
	More than 2 years	20	52.7
Proficiency level	Elementary	20	52.6
	Advanced	18	47.4
Have had native English teachers?	Yes	3	7.9
	No	35	92.1
Have had native English friends?	Yes	10	26.3
	No	28	73.7
Have been in English-speaking countries?	Yes	5	13.2
	No	33	86.8
Have English-knowing parents?	Yes	18	47.4
	No	20	52.6

administered to the participants. It is worth mentioning that there were no issues of proficiency in Persian for those speakers who had mother tongues other than Persian since the participants were all either native or second speakers of English with full command of Persian. Afterwards, focus-group interviews were conducted during which the participants were asked to freely voice their opinions regarding the localized varieties of English, such as Indian and German English, as well as native varieties of English like American and British English (see Appendix). Certainly, simple terms and questions were used during the interviews to tap into the attitudes of such young participants. The open-ended interview questions were formulated based on the researcher's own experiences and his predictions of what the participants' views might look like.

### **3.3. Procedure and data analysis**

The current study is descriptive, incorporating features of both quantitative (questionnaire-based data) and qualitative (interview-based data) research. At the beginning of the data collection, the researcher reassured the participants that the data they were going to provide would be kept confidential and used for academic purposes solely. The data were gathered from the participants on four sessions. First, the questionnaire was administered to each participant group, which took two sessions (i.e., one session for each group). Following the administration of the questionnaire, each participant was interviewed. The interviews lasted for two sessions (i.e., one session for each group) and the interviews were recorded. The data were analyzed both qualitatively (in the case of the data gathered by means of the interviews) and quantitatively (in the case of the data gathered by means of the questionnaire). Specifically, independent-samples *t*-test and percentages were utilized by means of the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS, version 19) for quantitative data and emergent themes of the interview transcripts were extracted from qualitative data.

## **4. Results**

The primary objective of the present study was to examine the attitudes of Iranian EFL learners toward English, its learning, and status. The results are presented below, first, in general terms describing the overall descriptive statistics (Tables 2–4) and, second, with *t*-test findings of each proficiency group with the purpose of investigating the differences between them. The most frequent response(s) in each table is/are in bold.

**Table 2.** Participants' attitudes toward English.

No.	Item	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Slightly disagree (%)	Slightly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)
1	English is an international language	5.3	0	0	5.3	10.5	<b>78.9</b>
2	English is the language used most widely in the world	5.3	2.6	0	13.2	21.1	<b>57.9</b>
3	Knowing English is important in understanding people from other countries	0	7.9	10.5	5.3	26.3	<b>50</b>
4	Knowing English is important in understanding the cultures of English-speaking countries, like USA or United Kingdom	2.6	0	0	21.1	23.7	<b>52.6</b>
5	If I have a chance, I would like to travel to English-speaking countries, like USA or United Kingdom	10.5	0	0	10.5	15.8	<b>63.2</b>
6	I do not like learning English	84.2	5.3	5.3	0	2.6	2.6
7	British English and American English are the major varieties of English in the world	2.6	2.6	5.3	18.4	34.2	<b>36.8</b>
8	The English spoken by Indian people is not authentic English	2.6	0	18.4	<b>28.9</b>	21.1	<b>28.9</b>
9	Many varieties of English exist in the world	2.6	0	7.9	31.6	<b>44.7</b>	13.2
10	The non-native English speakers can also speak Standard English. (Here, Standard English refers to English spoken in the English-speaking countries, like USA or United Kingdom)	2.6	10.5	5.3	15.8	<b>34.2</b>	31.6
11	I want to learn American English rather than Singapore English	0	5.3	0	0	15.8	<b>78.9</b>
12	As long as people understand me, it is not important which variety of English I speak	18.4	5.3	<b>28.9</b>	18.4	15.8	13.2
13	I have heard of the phrase "World Englishes"	31.6	21.1	15.8	13.2	10.5	7.9
14	I have heard of the phrase "Iranian English"	42.1	23.7	7.9	5.3	15.8	5.3
15	Like "Singaporean English" and "Indian English," Iran should have its own variety of English: "Iranian English"	34.2	18.4	7.9	10.5	7.9	21.1
16	When I speak English, I want to sound like a native speaker	5.3	5.3	2.6	10.5	26.3	<b>50</b>
17	When I speak English, I want to be identified clearly as Iranian	31.6	13.2	21.1	7.9	10.5	15.8
18	I am not confident in speaking English because of my Persian accent	34.2	23.7	10.5	15.8	7.9	7.9

#### 4.1. Attitudes in general

Tables 2–4 present the overall results of the participants' attitudes with no distinction made between elementary and advanced learners. It must be noted that the figures in these tables are the percentages calculated out of the total number of the participants. To begin with, Table 2 presents the results of attitudes toward English.

According to Table 2, the three most unanimously selected items of the questionnaire are Item 1 (78.9%), Item 6 (84.2%), and Item 11 (78.9%). On the

**Table 3.** Participants' attitudes toward the current English education policy.

No.	Item	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Slightly disagree (%)	Slightly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)
19	All Iranian students should learn English	7.9	7.9	7.9	2.6	26.3	<b>47.4</b>
20	Iranian college students should use English in either spoken or written communications among each other	<b>23.7</b>	13.2	15.8	21.1	15.8	10.5
21	English education should start from elementary school in Iran	5.3	2.6	0	5.3	15.8	<b>71.1</b>
22	English should not be a compulsory subject in the National University Entrance Examination in Iran	<b>50</b>	13.2	5.3	13.2	7.9	10.5
23	I would not take English if it were not a compulsory subject in school	<b>71.1</b>	5.3	5.3	5.3	5.3	7.9
24	If English were not taught at school, I would study it on my own	2.6	5.3	0	18.4	18.4	<b>55.3</b>
25	Oral language skills are more important than literacy skills in college English education	13.2	2.6	5.3	26.3	18.4	<b>34.2</b>
26	University English classes should be entirely conducted in English	7.9	0	7.9	10.5	26.3	<b>47.4</b>
27	University English classes should be conducted in both English and Persian	18.4	10.5	<b>23.7</b>	<b>23.7</b>	10.5	13.2
28	Besides English classes, other college classes, such as Math, should be also conducted in English	28.9	<b>36.8</b>	7.9	18.4	5.3	2.6
29	No English degree should be a requirement for obtaining the university degree in Iran	<b>36.8</b>	21.1	18.4	2.6	15.8	5.3
30	I am satisfied with the English education policy in Iran	<b>31.6</b>	7.9	10.5	15.8	15.8	18.4
31	I am satisfied with the college English education curriculum in Iran	23.7	15.8	15.8	<b>26.3</b>	13.1	5.3
32	I am satisfied with the English learning textbooks and other materials used in our school	28.9	10.5	13.2	26.3	10.5	10.5
33	I am satisfied with the English teaching methods used in our school	<b>39.5</b>	13.2	21.1	10.5	10.5	5.3
34	American English is the best model for Iranian learners of English	2.6	2.6	13.2	7.9	26.3	<b>47.4</b>
35	British English is the best model for Iranian learners of English	10.5	10.5	<b>31.6</b>	23.7	21.1	2.6
36	I prefer native speakers rather than non-native speakers as my English teachers	7.9	7.9	18.4	15.8	21.1	<b>28.9</b>

other hand, the four least unanimously selected items are Item 8 (28.9%), Item 12 (28.9%), Item 13 (31.6%), and Item 17 (31.6%).

One illuminating finding is that revealed by Items 14 and 15. These two items deal with the idea of "Iranian English," which constituted one of the objectives of the current study. The first of these items enquires as to the participants' cognizance of "Iranian English." To this, in general, 73.7% of the participants responded in the negative. Similar in content to the previous item, the next item is more critical, investigating the participants' agreement with the emergence of "Iranian English." As can be seen from Table 2, the result is that 60.5% of the participants disagreed with this idea.

**Table 4.** Participants' attitudes toward the purposes for learning English.

No.	Item	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Slightly disagree (%)	Slightly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)
37	In Iran, knowing English is more useful than knowing any other foreign language	0	13.2	5.3	21.1	18.4	42.1
38	Learning English is important for me, because English is a very useful tool in contemporary society	0	0	0	10.5	28.9	60.5
39	I learn English to catch up with economic and technological developments in the world	2.6	2.6	10.5	13.2	13.2	57.9
40	Before entering university, an important purpose for my English learning will be to obtain high scores in the National University Entrance Examination	10.5	5.3	13.2	26.3	23.7	21.1
41	An important purpose for my English learning is to obtain a university degree	26.3	15.8	23.7	18.4	7.9	7.9
42	An important purpose for my English learning is to get a decent job	13.2	15.8	7.9	34.2	15.8	13.2
43	An important purpose for my English learning is to obtain high scores in English examinations, such as IELTS and TOEFL	5.3	0	13.2	26.3	28.9	26.3
44	I learn English in order to obtain better education and job opportunities abroad	7.9	5.3	2.6	21.1	31.6	31.6
45	I learn English so that I can go abroad to experience English-speaking cultures	5.3	0	5.3	18.4	21.1	50
46	My parents believe that learning English is important	0	0	0	7.9	18.4	73.7

**Table 3** presents the results of the attitudes toward the English education policy currently pursued in Iran.

It can be seen from **Table 3** that, in expressing their attitudes toward the current English education policy in Iran, the participants have selected the following items with the highest unanimity: Item 21 (71.1%), Item 23 (71.1%), and Item 24 (55.3%). **Table 3** also shows that the least unanimously selected items are Item 20 (23.7%), Item 27 (23.7%), and Item 31 (26.3%).

Next, the results of the purposes for learning English by Iranian EFL learners are offered in **Table 4**.

**Table 4** indicates that, with regard to the participants' purposes for learning English, the following items of the questionnaire have been chosen most unanimously: Item 38 (60.5%), Item 39 (57.9%), and Item 46 (73.7%). On the other hand, the least agreed-upon items are as follows: Item 40 (26.3%), Item 41 (26.3%), and Item 43 (28.9%).

It might seem ironic that while the demographic information of the participants shows that 52.6% of the participants' parents do not know English and therefore learning English is expected to be an unimportant task to them, the participants' responses to the last item of the questionnaire is that 73.7% of the

participants' parents recognize the importance of learning English. This can be suggestive of the fact that the reasons for the parents not having learned English might be traced either to the lack of facilities such as language institutes, which have mushroomed in the recent years in Iran, or to their lack of acknowledging the significance of learning English. Another stronger reason might be that for the parents' generation, when they were students, learning English was not as important. The status of English internationally increased significantly during the last 20–30 years or so, i.e., from the time the parents were students.

#### 4.2. Attitudes across proficiency

Unlike the previous section, this part offers the results of the participants' attitudes across the two proficiency levels (i.e., elementary and advanced). Thus, [Table 5](#) sums up the results of an independent-samples *t*-test of the participants' attitudes toward English.

[Table 5](#) shows that there are significant differences between the two proficiency groups in the following items of the questionnaire:

$$t_{\text{Item 3}} (30.33) = -1.81; p = .04$$

$$t_{\text{Item 7}} (28.5) = -2.66; p = .013$$

$$t_{\text{Item 8}} (32) = 2.76; p = .009$$

$$t_{\text{Item 13}} (34) = 2.45; p = .019$$

$$t_{\text{Item 17}} (36) = 2.01; p = .051$$

[Table 6](#) below presents the results of the comparison of the participants' attitudes toward the English education policy across proficiency.

**Table 5.** Independent samples test of participants' attitudes toward English.

Item	t-Test for equality of means			
	<i>t</i>	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference
Item 1	-1.910	36	.070	-.689
Item 2	-.038	36	.970	-.017
Item 3	-2.121	30.335	.042	-.844
Item 4	-1.617	36	.115	-.550
Item 5	-.844	36	.404	-.433
Item 6	-.260	36	.796	-.094
Item 7	-2.663	28.571	.013	-.939
Item 8	2.767	32	.009	1.119
Item 9	-.644	34	.524	-.222
Item 10	-1.075	36	.290	-.489
Item 11	-.111	35	.912	-.035
Item 12	1.640	34	.110	.889
Item 13	2.454	34	.019	1.278
Item 14	.773	34	.445	.444
Item 15	-1.166	35	.251	-.771
Item 16	-1.728	36	.084	-.789
Item 17	2.015	36	.051	1.161
Item 18	.658	36	.515	.356

The bold values in Table denote significance values equal to or less than .05.

**Table 6.** Independent samples test of participants' attitudes toward the English education policy.

Item	t-Test for equality of means			
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference
Item 19	.050	36	.960	.028
Item 20	.428	36	.671	.239
Item 21	1.187	35	.243	.520
Item 22	1.354	36	.184	.794
Item 23	.392	35	.698	.219
Item 24	.472	36	.640	.200
Item 25	1.926	36	.062	1.017
Item 26	<b>–2.378</b>	<b>25.093</b>	<b>.025</b>	<b>–1.044</b>
Item 27	2.986	35	<b>.005</b>	1.462
Item 28	.371	36	.713	.167
Item 29	<b>–2.032</b>	<b>27.955</b>	<b>.052</b>	<b>–1.061</b>
Item 30	3.583	36	<b>.001</b>	1.972
Item 31	.618	34	.541	.500
Item 32	.840	34	.407	.486
Item 33	.591	36	.558	.311
Item 34	1.498	36	.143	.639
Item 35	1.500	33	.143	.683
Item 36	<b>–1.921</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>.063</b>	<b>–.972</b>

The bold values in Table denote significance values equal to or less than .05.

According to **Table 6**, the two proficiency groups differ significantly in their attitudes toward the English education policy in the following items of the questionnaire:

$$t_{\text{Item 26}} (25.09) = -2.378; p = .25$$

$$t_{\text{Item 27}} (33.77) = 2.986; p = .05$$

$$t_{\text{Item 29}} (27.95) = -2.032; p = .05$$

$$t_{\text{Item 30}} (36) = 3.583; p = .001$$

These items deal with such subjects as adopting an English-only policy (Item 26), a bilingual education policy (Item 27), use of English as a requirement for obtaining a university degree (Item 29), and satisfaction with the English education policy (Item 30) in Iran.

As stated earlier, the study also aimed at exploring the attitudes of Iranian EFL learners toward the purposes for learning English. The results are summarized in **Table 7**.

**Table 7** reveals that significant differences exist between the two proficiency groups in terms of the following questionnaire items:

$$t_{\text{Item 41}} (35) = 3.375; p = .02$$

$$t_{\text{Item 42}} (35) = 2.554; p = .015$$

For better illustration of the two proficiency groups' preferences, **Table 8** offers the most frequently selected response(s) by each proficiency group in those items of the questionnaire chosen with a significant difference.

The above items concerned such issues as the facilitating role of knowing English in understanding people from other countries (Item 3), the status of British and American English as the major varieties of English language (Item 7), the authenticity of the nonspeaker varieties of English such as Indian

**Table 7.** Independent-samples test of participants' attitudes toward the purposes for learning English.

Item	t-Test for equality of means			
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference
Item 37	.321	35	.750	.153
Item 38	.943	36	.352	.211
Item 39	1.709	36	.096	.733
Item 40	.588	35	.560	.309
Item 41	3.375	35	.002	1.532
Item 42	2.554	35	.015	1.259
Item 43	.932	33	.358	.433
Item 44	.023	35	.982	.012
Item 45	.481	36	.633	.211
Item 46	.953	36	.347	.194

The bold values in Table denote significance values equal to or less than .05.

**Table 8.** The most frequently selected response(s) for the significantly different questionnaire items.

Area	Questionnaire item	Proficiency group			
		Elementary		Advanced	
Response	Percent	Response	Percent		
English	Item 3	Strongly agree	40	Strongly agree	61.1
	Item 7	Agree	30	Strongly agree	50
	Item 8	Strongly agree	50	Slightly agree	44.4
	Item 13	Disagree	25	Strongly agree	50
English education policy	Item 26	Strongly agree	40	Strongly agree	55.6
	Item 27	Slightly agree	35	Strongly disagree	27.8
	Item 29	Strongly disagree	28	Slightly disagree	45
		Agree	28		
English Learning Purposes	Item 30	Agree	30	Strongly disagree	55.6
	Item 41	Slightly agree	30	Strongly disagree	44.4
	Item 42	Slightly agree	25	Slightly agree	44.4
		Strongly agree	25		

English (Item 8), the participants' awareness of the concept "WEs" (Item 13), conducting university English classes in English solely (Item 26), conducting university English classes in both English and Persian (Item 27), the necessity of having a degree in English as a requirement to obtain a university degree (Item 29), English education policy in Iran (Item 30), obtaining a high score in the National University Entrance Examination through English (Item 41), and getting a worthwhile job through English (Item 42). It should be also added here that the justification for asking these particular questions was that they address common beliefs held by EFL learners in Iran.

It can be seen from **Table 8** that, on average, the advanced group of participants have scored higher in their responses (i.e., 46.1%) than the elementary group (i.e., 33%). In addition to the percentage of the responses, the types of the responses selected also differed in some items. For instance, in the case of Items 13, 27, 30, and 41, when one group disagreed the other group agreed and vice versa. This finding is of considerable significance as it is

suggestive of substantial discrepancy in the ways that the two proficiency groups view the aforementioned items. It is possible that exposure to English has affected the advanced participants' views toward English with regard to their views of English as an international (as opposed to local) language (Item 13), the educational policy that must be adopted in teaching English (Items 27 and 30) and their purposes of learning it (Item 40).

## 5. Discussion

The objective of the current study was to examine the attitudes of Iranian EFL learners toward WE, WEs, and EIL across proficiency. It is interesting to see that the items of the questionnaire that were selected the most unanimously by the participants are those that deal most directly with the status of English as an "international" language. For instance, in the case of the participants' attitudes toward English which were examined in the first part of the questionnaire, the responses showed that the following items had been agreed upon most frequently:

Item 1: English is an international language.

Item 6: I do not like learning English.

Item 11: I want to learn American English rather than Singapore English.

The synopsis of the whole content of the abovementioned items is that the participants conceive of English as an internationally recognized language, are interested in learning Standard English, and prefer it to non-native varieties of English such as Singapore English. This fervent desire to learn English is also reflected in the other items of the second part of the questionnaire which have been selected most frequently:

Item 21: English education should start from elementary school in Iran.

Item 23: I would not take English if it were not a compulsory subject in school.

Item 24: If English were not taught at school, I would study it on my own.

It is interesting that while Items 23 and 24 contradict each other, the participants, both elementary and advanced groups taken together, agreed with them most highly and did not differ significantly in their perceptions toward both items. Similar results have also been reported in the literature. Madrid and Cañado (2004) found out that students' perceptions inclined toward native teachers as their proficiency increased and teachers were found to be more positive on natives than on non-natives. Madrid and Cañado declared that such perceptions might have negative outcomes for language teaching and learning profession.

The analysis of the interview results also demonstrated views that were found to be in tandem with the data gathered by means of the questionnaire.

The following interview transcripts, for instance, show an immensely positive regard for English:

**Interviewee 1:** I agree with English becoming an international language. The world needs one common language to speak with. But the problem is that not all people may accept it because everyone likes his/her language to be the international language.

**Interviewee 2:** It's good for English to be used by all the people of the world. An international language will benefit the whole world because people all over the world will have a chance to speak with one another in one language without difficulty.

**Interviewee 3:** English is an easy language to learn. It's not difficult like other languages like French. So, it's better that this language be used as the international language.

These quotes demonstrate that the learners' attitudes toward whether English can serve as an international language are shaped by the learners' attitudes toward the English language itself.

Other parts of the questionnaire are also indicative of this keen sense of "native-speakerism." By way of example, Items 14 and 15 which enquired about "Iranian English" clearly revealed that the participants are not aware of such a variety of English nor do they welcome its emergence. This finding is particularly worthy of attention since it indicates that Iranian EFL learners, whether those who have elementary knowledge of English or advanced learners, still hold a one-way view of the world overwhelmingly dominated by Western values with English of the United States and the United Kingdom as the display of this dominance. In this regard, Wenfag's (2011, 8) assertion is illuminating: "The attempt to remove the genetic element from the definition of 'native speaker' is very welcome, because such unbalanced centricity cannot embody the equality in Englishes. This equality is very vital for characterizing globalization." However, what this finding demonstrates is that Iranian EFL learners still privilege NSs over NNSs while the notion of the NS has recently been called into question. For instance, Flowerdew (2001) cited many positive aspects of NNSs that NSs hardly possess including NNSs' cognizance of cross-cultural pragmatics, their mastery of other languages, as well as the international scope of the NNSs' views.

The preference of "NSs of English" over NNSs as teachers of English was also reflected in another part: Item 36. To this item, 65.8% of the participants responded in the affirmative, thus further confirming their high regard for native English speakers as the sole owners of the language. This finding remarkably aligns itself with Saito's (2012) findings who related this orientation to teaching materials, pedagogical practices, media discourses, and others. Earlier, Jenkins (2006) had reached similar results in a review of the perspectives taken with regard to WEs. Further, Madrid and Cañado (2004) reached similar conclusions in a study done with both teachers and learners.

The findings clearly reveal that Iranian EFL learners view English as “one” entity, incapable of decomposing into local varieties and that the only “legitimate,” “pure,” and “original” English (the participants’ own words) is that spoken in English-native-speaking countries (i.e., the United States, England, and Australia). The non-native, localized varieties of English were described as “unimportant,” “incomplete,” “illegitimate,” “flawed,” and even as “corrupt” and “useless.” In this regard, the following interview transcripts stand out:

**Interviewee 4:** I believe that such Englishes as German English or Indian English and so on must not come into existence and that only British and American English should be used unchanged everywhere.

**Interviewee 5:** There’s just no reason why these Englishes should exist. They’re not needed. Their existence is unreasonable and will make the situation worse.

**Interviewee 6:** I believe that such Englishes will threaten the existence of the indigenous languages of the country they come into existence in. I don’t agree with such Englishes. It is better for the whole world to speak only one English!

**Interviewee 7:** I do agree with the idea of English becoming an international language but not with non-native varieties of English because these varieties will make it hard for people across the globe to communicate easily.

These transcripts show that the participants regard the non-native varieties of English as a hindrance to international communication. On the contrary, EIL was viewed to facilitate the task of global contact on the condition that the only English used internationally be the native-speaker English.

The results are remarkably in line with Saito’s (2012) findings in a Japanese context. Saito (2102) reported on the findings of a study which examined the attitudes of middle school Japanese EFL learners, revealing that there exists a strong native-speaker orientation among Japanese students and that highly positive evaluations of the native-speaker norm are dominant among them. Saito speculated that this native-speaker ideal has roots in the current vast West-supporting propaganda spread by the media, teaching materials, and pedagogical practices. Similarly, while Medgyes (2001) asserts that the terms “native English-speaking teacher” (henceforth NEST) and “non-native English-speaking teacher” (henceforth non-NEST) might be said to be discriminatory, the distinction between these two terms and the subsequent debate over them should not be overlooked but should be brought to further attention and research. Further, Medgyes (2001) mentions the weaknesses as well as the strengths of both, hence attempting to refute the unjust flaws that have been unkindly attributed to the non-NEST. NS-centered inclination seems to retain increasing dominance in other areas of language. Researchers, for instance, have even identified a tendency toward NS norms in testing language abilities (e.g., Hu 2012).

It can be seen that the participants view ease of communication across the globe as the major advantage arising from the existence of EIL. This is appreciable but there is no prevailing consensus on this issue among researchers. Crystal (2003, 16) states that "the use of a single language by a community is no guarantee of social harmony or mutual understanding."

The above as well as the following quotes can also be suggestive of "linguistic self-hatred" (Labov et al. 2006; as cited in Zhang 2010) among Iranian EFL learners in which they despise NNS varieties and praise NS varieties instead. To set an example, the following interview transcripts clearly show this view:

**Interviewee 8:** The English language is sweet and is easier than many other languages like Arabic or Japanese to learn. I'm happy with English as an international language.

**Interviewee 9:** English is taught everywhere and is accepted by all the people across the world as an international language. Besides, it is easier to learn than many other languages.

The findings of the current study clearly showed that the participants view English as a useful commodity which can be of significant importance and utility in their career, education, and travel. This is clearly indicative of the position that English has occupied in the Iranian society. As Kachru and Nelson (1996) have stated, such an attitude derives from the belief in the power and position of English which has been recognized widely recently. It is likely that NSs acknowledge NSs and prefer them to (non)native speakers due to the power that they have gained during history (see Lindemann 2003). The following interview transcripts are suggestive of this view:

**Interviewee 10:** If we learn English then it'll be easier for us to study and travel abroad especially in English-speaking countries.

**Interviewee 11:** People in the most developed countries of the world speak English now. If we know English then we can easily communicate with them.

**Interviewee 12:** Speaking English has many advantages. For example, when somebody knows English well he can travel to other countries and study there without difficulty. It is as if a heavy burden has been taken from him.

Contrary to the views voiced above, some disagreement was also expressed toward the phenomenon of English and its status as an international language:

**Interviewee 13:** I think that speaking English too often causes us to be removed from our native language which is our identity. After a while, it will cause us to sound more English than Persian even when we speak our mother tongue.

**Interviewee 14:** If English is an international language that's only because of its colonial past. The British colonized many countries in the past like India. There isn't any logical reason why another language cannot be the international language.

**Interviewee 15:** The English language has many ridiculous grammatical rules. For example, why should there be only one “you” [compare with plural and singular “you” in Persian] in English when you refer to one person and sometimes to more than one person? I don’t agree with such a language becoming an international language.

It is interesting to see that EFL learners at the age range of 14–18 or above posit such profound views toward EIL. Researchers have also pointed to the risks of an international language. Crystal (2003, 14–15), for instance, reminds us of the possible dangers inherent in the existence of an international language, mentioning such risks as the formation of “an elite monolingual class which is dismissive of other languages,” making individuals lazy about learning other languages than the international language and finally the death of minority languages. The quotations above confirm the fact that these views are widely held. Crystal’s (2003, 15) recommendation is “It is important to face up to these fears!”

Unlike these findings, which reveal EFL learners’ strong tendency toward native-speakerism, there were some opposing voices. The following is an example of the learners’ positive view of the non-native varieties of English:

**Interviewee 16:** I think all nations have a right to create their own variety of English according to their customs and beliefs.

The above interviewee’s belief is a profound insight because it takes into account the social reality of language use, i.e., the fundamental concepts of sociolinguistics. Needless to say, variation and change are inevitable, continuous processes in language. Thus, the fact that Iranian learners of English still think of English as “one” and only “one” entity, belonging exclusively to its NSs is evidence that they seem to not be cognizant of the multiple perspectives recently adopted on the status of English which assert that “linguistic features which differ from Standard English are not necessarily errors but may instead represent components of a New English” (Kirkpatrick and Deterding 2011, 374).

## 6. Conclusion

The study clearly demonstrates the marked tendency of EFL learners to associate English with its NSs, with what has been labeled the “Inner Circle” (Kachru 1985a, 1992a; Crystal 2003). Therefore, the reference group and the only legitimate authorities on English are viewed by Iranian EFL learners to be the NSs of English who “first created English and who own it” (an excerpt from an interviewee). The “Expanding Circle” and even the “Outer Circle” speakers of English are also dissociated from the only “true” and “legitimate” version of English by which they meant the English spoken by Americans, the British, Australians, and other “Inner Circle” speakers. Clearly, this tendency reflects what has been dubbed “native-speakerism” defined as “the over-representation of the ‘native-speaker’ (NS) point of view at the expense of the ‘non-

native-speaker' (NNS) one" (Waters 2007, 281). This finding also reflects what Kumaravadivelu (2006, 218) terms "marginalization," a process that he defines as "the overt and covert mechanisms that are used to valorize the everything associated with the colonial *Self* and marginalize everything associated with the colonized *Other*" (original emphasis).

Finally, Jenkins (2006, 171) argued that "Despite the strength of the counter arguments, the belief in NS ownership persists among both native and non-native speakers- teachers, teacher educators and linguists alike." Of course, Jenkins' statement seems to be disappointing particularly because while a good wealth of research has been done and a large number of arguments have been put forward in defense of the NNSs, no practical results and no signs of positive attitudes among learners toward NNSs have been documented in the literature.

The acute sense of native-speakerism among Iranian EFL learners can be also attributed to their purpose of identifying with the NSs as a means of self-expression. Expressing one's identity through the target language has also been documented in contexts other than Iran such as Hong Kong, for instance (Zhang 2010). Research has even confirmed that such a sense exists among EFL teachers as well (e.g., Kim 2011).

The results of the present study have clear implications to inform practice. One of these implications is that since EFL learners hold positive attitudes toward NSs but not toward NNSs, it is likely that they construe of NNSs as incompetent or merely not as proficient. This stance is very unfortunate and needs to be moderated. They should be made aware that NNSs also benefit from a large number of positive aspects as highlighted by many researchers (e.g., Flowerdew 2001; Medgyes 2001; Modiano 2009; Petrić 2009). On the plus side, many scholars now hold that the status of the ownership of English is changing, not to mention that the whole concept of English ownership has been forcefully challenged (Caine 2008; Cook 1999; Holliday 2009; Lurda 2009; McKay 2003; Widdowson 1994). These scholars have also expressed regret about this situation. Petrić (2009), for example, narrates how a consular official expressed mock surprise when, in response to the official's enquiry as to the reason why Petrić was migrating to Samara, Petrić, a NNS of English, had replied that he had been invited to teach English, an issue that sounds ridiculous to the officer simply because the teacher of English was a NNS. It is unfortunate that research has confirmed EFL teachers' tendency to privilege the NS with the sole right as the owner of the target language, a tendency that Kim (2011) deems as leading to "low professional self-esteem." This evidence suggests that views of the NS as being the "best" instructors of the language are quite widespread around the world, and arguably not just due to Western-dominated propaganda (as stated earlier, with reference to Saito's (2012) findings).

Some scholars have also suggested some solutions to this NS orientation among EFL learners. Saito (2012, 1078), for instance, supported what he termed “educational intervention,” stating that “[...] the native speaker orientation calls for an educational intervention at middle school when the vast majority of Japanese embark on EFL.” Similarly, Kim (2011, 65) proposes that “non-NESs should develop the personal and professional confidence to perceive themselves as legitimate English teachers.” Caine (2008) also called for challenging the current practices and conceptions of language teaching. In spite of these recommendations, it has been evidenced that challenging this sense of native-speakerism is very often faced with substantial resistance on the part of both learners and teachers/practitioners.

The dark side of the attitude coin of Iranian EFL learners is that holding negative attitudes toward NNSs can result in their lack of acceptance of their teachers since nearly all teachers of English in Iran are NNSs of English. This implies that primarily Iranian EFL learners should be made cognizant of the positive aspects of NNSs. For instance, Medgyes (2001, 436), while admitting to the weaknesses of non-native English teachers, cited the following as their strong points:

- (1) Provide a better learner model;
- (2) Teach language-learning strategies more effectively;
- (3) Supply more information about the English language;
- (4) Better anticipate and prevent language difficulties;
- (5) Are more sensitive to their students;
- (6) Benefit from their ability to use the students' mother tongue.

The above strong points are interestingly beneficial but they seem to focus only on the “language teaching” aspect. To the abovementioned points, it might be added: NNS teachers also possess a better understanding of and display more heightened sensitivity toward the learners' first culture, setting, and values. Questioning the current practices and transforming them, however, seems to be a substantially demanding task, particularly in an expanding circle context (see, e.g., Caine 2008). Other researchers have called for intervention in modifying students' perceptions toward more positivity as well (Madrid and Cañado 2004).

No study is complete in all aspects. The present study did not consider the role of gender which can be an influential factor in learners' attitudes toward a certain issue. The second limitation concerns the fact that the participants were assigned to the elementary and advanced groups based on the in-house proficiency criteria of the institute where they studied English. More accurate results could have been obtained had the participants' linguistic level been determined by administering a proficiency test. Convenient sampling is

another limitation. Meticulous research requires random sampling of participants (Mackey and Gass 2005).

To summarize, it is unquestionable that acknowledging one international language, be it English or any other language, moves us toward a “monolingualistic,” and probably a “monocultural,” world. Such a world is away from a multilingual and multicultural variety and it is where sameness, not variety, is the norm. This is just, linguistically speaking, not democratic (see Crystal 2003). Indeed, whether English is a threat to other languages is still a controversial issue (House 2003).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

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## Appendix. Interview

- (1) What do you think of English becoming an international language?
- (2) What do you think of the non-native varieties of English like Indian English or Philippine English?
- (3) What are the advantages of such non-native varieties of English?
- (4) What are the disadvantages of such non-native varieties of English?
- (5) Do you think that such varieties should also exist along with Standard English?