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The Representation of Iran in Englishcentral Educational Website: Unfolding the Hidden Curriculum

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Abstract

Despite their widespread popularity and rapid growth, the Internet-mediated English educational materials for learners of English as a foreign/second language (FL/SL) have rarely been analyzed in terms of their potential hidden curriculum. Accordingly, the present study aims to address this need through conducting a CDA investigation into some lessons which are randomly selected from an English educational website called "Englishcentral." Adapting, expanding, and adopting some elements of Van Leeuwen's (2008) Social Actor Network, the researchers attempt to describe and explain the representation of "Iran" in Englishcentral. Investigating and thematizing the research data revealed that the keyword "Iran" was used in this website to refer to three groups of social actors, namely the Iranian government and officials, Iranian people, and Iranian people and/or government/officials. The way these social actors are *associated* and *dissociated*, *activated* and *passivated*, *personalized* and *impersonalized* creates remarkable findings which give support to the presence of particular hidden agenda in this program. In all, the results of this study reveal that the Iranian social actors are

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portrayed unfavorably in Englishcentral, which is an alleged English educational program.

Key words: Hidden Curriculum; Critical Discourse Analysis; Van Leeuwen's Social Actor Network; Iran; Englishcentral; English Language Teaching (ELT)

Introduction

Developing educational materials for learners of English as a foreign/second language is a complicated job demanding high levels of professional knowledge and experience, recognition of learners' needs and wants, and awareness of both English and the source value system. In addition to professional knowledge and experience, the authors' belief system has a particular role in deciding the content of an English coursebook. The interaction of these factors results in two types of curriculum: the overt or formal curriculum consisting of different components of a textbook such as vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, etc., and the covert or "hidden curriculum" (Martin, 1983, p. 2) which is the reflection of particular values, attitudes, and beliefs implicitly conveyed to English learners.

In recent years, the existence of such hidden curricula has been the concern of many English language teaching (ELT) researchers and critical thinkers. This has led to more awareness of and sensitivity toward the concealed layers of English education and its hegemonic goals (Fairclough, 2006; Pennycook & Coutand-Marin, 2005; Phillipson, 1992, 2009) as well as to voicing the resistance of English learners (Canagarajah, 1999; Giddens, 2000; Pennycook, 2007; Tomlinson, 1991) and educational theorists (Freire, 1973; Giroux, 1983; Weiler, 1988) who try to draw attentions to the subjugation enhanced by global English education. Inspired with such views, many researchers have conducted a variety of English textbook analyses evaluating different aspects of their hidden agenda (e.g., Arkian, 2008; Cunningworth, 1995; Ehrensal, 2001; Gray, 2000; Holly, 1990; Holme, 2003; Kilickaya, 2004; Spring, 2009). As a result, many ELT scholars have started to call for including locally or internationally-oriented issues in English textbooks (e.g. Bashir, 2011; Chen, Eslami, & Shin, 2011; Kiss & Weninger, 2013; McKay, 2003; Naji & Pishghadam, 2012).

Since the 1980s, developments in computer technology have enhanced the design and production of multimodal educational materials. This was further facilitated with the advent and advancement of Internet technology, which attracted

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many English learners and teachers (Andrews, 2007). Today, there are many educational websites offering English courses on one or a combination of English skills. Some features of the Internet-mediated English programs like being interactive and non-linear, offering up-to-date content as well as fun and games, providing prompt correction and feedback, encouraging autonomous and individualized learning, facilitating the integrative learning of four skills, providing easy access to online dictionaries and other information sources, and many other possibilities have made the Internet an all-inclusive learning package and thus popular among English learners (Singhal, 1997).

Most popular ELT websites are produced in "core zones" (Pennycook, 2007) especially in the US, while they are widely used by other than core zone nations. Millions of English learners use English learning programs on the web to improve their English communication skills while the related sites are abound with Western political, ideological and cultural messages packed into learning programs. The messages range from US and Western news included as parts of English educational materials as is the case, for example, with BBC and Englishcentral websites, to Western cultural tips to be consciously or unconsciously acquired by English learners through websites such as VoA, to English for missionary and Biblical purposes that is rapidly growing on the Web, and a quick search would result in many such missionary ELT programs.

Despite their significance, the above topics, and many similar issues pertaining to ELT on the Web, have rarely been dealt with. While the content of English coursebook materials has been the subject of multitude critical studies (e.g., Holm, 2003; Kakavand, 2009; Sadeghy, 2008), the Internet-enhanced English educational materials do not appear to have been critically analyzed. In the present study, we attempt to critically examine the hidden curriculum in an English educational website called Englishcentral, which introduces its goal as enhancing English learners' listening, pronunciation, and vocabulary ability.

For this purpose, we conducted a CDA study to closely analyze some video transcripts of Englishcentral. Our criterion for selecting the video clips has been the inclusion of the keyword "Iran" which was expected to illustrate how Iran was represented in this program. As the research instrument, parts of Van Leeuwen's

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(2008) Social Actor Network which could help us describe and explain our data were adapted and utilized for the critical discourse analysis of the materials.

In the following parts, related literature on the aforementioned topics will be provided along with the research methodology and the related discussions.

Van Leeuwen's Social Actor Network

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,* rather than the *linguistic-functional* aspect of the analysis, in correspondence with the contexts of situation. According to Van Leeuwen (2008), discourses are social cognitions and socially specific ways for representing social practices in text, and it is possible to reconstruct discourses from the texts that draw on them.

Unlike many other forms of 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). His main reason for doing so is the lack of a one-to-one relation between linguistic and social roles of language:

> Agency, for instance, as a sociological concept, is of major and classic importance in critical discourse analysis. . . . But sociological agency is not always realized by linguistic agency, by the grammatical role of "agent." (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 23)

In his Social Actor Network, Van Leeuwen (2008) provides a variety of discursive strategies which are responsible for different ways of representing social actors. His social orientation along with his elaborations on social actor representation types has made his network a good model for our purpose, i.e., investigating the representation of Iran in Englishcentral. This is discussed within

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the theoretical framework of hidden curriculum which is briefly presented in the following section.

Hidden Curriculum

The term "hidden curriculum" was coined by Jackson (1968) in his book *Life in Classroom*. He proposed that education is a fundamentally social process, and that schooling and all its entailments aim to fulfill this end. In his popular definition, the hidden curriculum is a socialization process that takes place in school without being part of its formal curricular content (Margolis, Soldatenko, Acker & Gair, 2001, p. 1). The hidden curriculum was further explored by a number of educators such as Paulo Freire (1973) in his seminal work *the Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* He explored various effects of presumptive teaching on students, schools, and society as a whole and uncovered the suppressive power of educational systems. Freire (1973) and other critical thinkers like Giroux (1983), and Weiler (1988) argued that hidden curricula occur at multiple places and times and that the educators' responsibility is to find out "how both the form and the content of the curriculum reproduce structures of power and oppression" (Margolis et al., 2001, p. 16).

The hidden curriculum is thought to be a means through which the ruling system exerts its power over people and their thoughts, and it is intentionally hidden to preserve the status quo, the hegemony of the powerful over the social strata (Margolis et al., 2001, p. 3). Margolis et al. (2001, p. 3) label hidden curriculum, the "other curriculum," as opposed to formal, overt curriculum, to attribute this curriculum to a privileged group other than the public. Einser (1985, pp. 97-98) calls hidden curriculum the "null curriculum" in that it nullifies "any perspectives that question the capitalist project," i.e., those that take into account the interests of groups or individuals other than stockholders and decision makers.

In English language teaching (ELT), different aspects of hidden curriculum present in the field especially in authoring, publishing, and disseminating English coursebooks throughout the globe has been the concern of some critical scholars. Coining the term "linguistic imperialism," Phillipson (1992) proposed that ELT as a whole is an imperialistic project which aims to boost Western commerce and disseminate Western culture and ideology mainly through global English

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coursebooks supported by some Western governments. Progler (2011) and Spring (2009) posit that marketing English language information through centralized coursebooks is a way of controlling knowledge and presenting it as unquestionable. There are several studies on the key role of English textbooks produced in developed countries in enhancing the spread of their culture (Cunningworth, 1995; Holly, 1990; Kakavand, 2009; Kilickaya, 2004; Sadeghy, 2008). Despite the recognition of the need for the critical analyses of English educational materials, the Internet-mediated types of such materials have rarely been the focus of critical analysis. This topic is briefly introduced in the following section.

Internet-Mediated English Education

As a mass medium, the Internet is now a prominent technology which has opened new doors to global communication and education. Its information-related services have significant applications for education in general and for English pedagogy in particular. The Internet is becoming the medium of instruction and self-study of different fields due to diverse facilities and unrivaled potentials such as access to continuous 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 in comparison to campus learning, the increasing ubiquity of the Internet, growing public familiarity with this technology, simple access to vast sources of information and relatively high speed of information transfer, attractions of multimedia-assisted learning, and active interaction of learners with their teachers and peers on the Web.

With the advent and rapid development of the Internet technology, traditional textbooks are likely to give way to electronic and Internet-mediated English learning materials. Despite the widespread popularity of the latter type of materials, they have rarely been subject to multidimensional critical analyses as has been the case with traditional paper books. In fact, the ELT literature is extensive with regard to critical issues related to traditional coursebooks such as propagating the US family and social values as well as its social order as represented in American English coursebooks (Arkian, 2008; Gray, 2000; Holme, 2003), the threat of English coursebooks for learners' indigenous cultures (Ehrensal, 2001; Spring, 2009), English learners' frustration due to incongruity between the English culture and their indigenous value system and life style (Brown, 2001; Canagarajah, 1999; Sadeghy, 2008), and consequently the recognition of the need for including indigenous culture (Adaskou, Britten, & Fahsi, 1990; Chen, Eslami, & Shin, 2011;

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Cortazzi & Jin, 1999; McKay, 2003) or international culture (Bashir, 2011; Cortazzi & Jin, 1999; Kiss & Weninger, 2013; McKay, 2003; Naji & Pishghadam, 2012) in English textbooks. In ELT literature, however, there are rarely any critical studies which investigate the content of Internet-mediated materials.

Critical study of English educational materials on the Web is 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. The implications of Internet-mediated English teaching and learning for non-English-speaking nations can be studied from a range of perspectives; from cultural and ideological, to societal and economic, to political and international, etc. This study is an effort to explore the traces of the hidden curriculum in Englishcentral, utilizing critical discourse analysis (CDA) as its method as will be discussed below.

Methodology

Corpus

Our corpus is taken from Englishcentral which is a website for fostering English listening comprehension, vocabulary, and pronunciation, and both teachers and learners can access authentic video clips in English. It provides a broad range of topics falling under seven main categories: *Academic English*, *Business English, Media English*, *Social English*, *Travel English, Young Learners English*, and the *All* category, which contains miscellaneous video clips. It also has links to some channels like: *AERA English TV, See Britain,* and *Voice of America*. Creating an account on Englishcentral as well as using it as a simple user is free, but teachers and learners are charged for more advanced applications such as listening to other students' recordings, viewing detailed student pronunciation reports, and teacher training sessions. For the present study, the discourses of all video clips related to Iran, i.e., 63 ones, were critically analyzed using Van Leeuwen's Social Actor Network.

Instrumentation: Van Leeuwen's Social Actor Network

In his network model of social actors' representation, Van Leeuwen (2008, p. 52) initially introduces two main discursive mechanisms which are responsible for

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either including social actors in a practice (*inclusion*) or excluding them (*exclusion*). Exclusion is further divided into two other discursive mechanisms, namely *suppression* and *backgrounding*. Suppression occurs when social actors and their activities are completely deleted from a discourse without leaving a trace behind. Backgrounding, however, is a "less radical" (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 29) form of exclusion where the social actors are omitted from the immediate scene of a given social practice but they can be retrieved elsewhere in the text.

As for inclusion, Van Leeuwen (2008) offers a taxonomy of 46 main discursive mechanisms which are themselves broken down into more specific subcategories, all being responsible for explaining how the included social actors are represented in a given discourse. From this taxonomy, we are concerned mainly with three sets of dichotomous strategies namely: *association* versus *dissociation*, *activation* versus *passivation*, and *personalization* versus *impersonalization*, which are briefly explained below. Applying these three strategies to our data has two interrelated reasons: First, they are the most frequently used discursive mechanisms in our data. Second, they have the highest descriptive and explanatory power with regard to our data.

Association versus Dissociation: Van Leeuwen (2008) introduces *association* as the ways through which social actors are linked together to form a group or society without being labeled as such. The following example from Englishcentral is illustrative:

> **Britain, the United States, and France send warships through strait of Hormuz in a warning to the Iranian regime which has threatened to close the passage.**

In this example, Britain, the United States, and France make an unlabeled group whose benefits contradict those of "the Iranian regime." This alliance exists only in relation to the specific context of Iran's sanctions due to its nuclear programs, and might easily collapse in other situations. In fact, association, as conceptualized by Van Leeuwen (2008, p. 39), concerns itself only with how a number of social actors interact in relation to particular activities without forming an "established, institutionalized" group. In the course of the present study, it was found that association can be realized not only in relation to social actors but also in relation to *attributes* and *actions*. To clarify the distinction between the original meaning of

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association proposed by Van Leeuwen and the new ones added by the researchers, the former was called *type I* and the latter, *type II* association.

The way the researchers expanded the concept to include a wide range of associations can enhance the description and explanation power of our analyses. This latter type does not limit association with the relation established among *social actors* in a discourse. Rather, it displays how a particular discourse can also associate one social actor with a particular *action or attribute* or with a combination of them, and how the connection of social actors to each other or to other discourse elements such as actions and attributes can inculcate particular meanings or relations. Another example from Englishcentral can clarify the point:

> **In Iran, a day after announcing a new development in its nuclear program, Tehran says it has successfully tested a cruise missile.**

It is evident that the example above does not associate Iran with any social actor other than Tehran metonymically used for the Iranian government. However, other associations are made between Iran and the action of developing its nuclear program as well as between Tehran and the action of "testing a cruise missile," henceforth called type II associations with actions.

Another type II association is concerned with attributes. Attributes address one of the following functions: 1. They "characterize" a social actor via linking him/her to an attribute such as being clever, deceitful, etc. 2. They "identify" (Halliday & Mathiessen, 2004, p. 215) a social actor through identity-related features like job, nationality, religious sect, etc. As this will be exemplified in our data analysis, there are many attributes, linked systematically to particular social actors, which make them a rich source for critical enquiry.

A similar categorization was devised by the researcher for dissociation. In Van Leeuwen's (2008, p. 39) Social Actor Network, dissociation refers to "unformation of groups" which have previously been formed in a discourse. In this sense, dissociation is dependent on the initial existence of association and emerges with

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the breakdown of association as the text proceeds. In our new perspective, dissociation is different from the way it is used by Van Leeuwen in two ways: First, it does not rely on association as a precondition; rather, it can be present in a text independent of social actors being formerly associated or not. In the data obtained for sake of the present study, in most cases, dissociations were established without a pretext of formerly-constructed associations, especially where our data consisted of uncontextualized, brief news scripts. Second, dissociation is not limited to cases where a particular discourse excludes certain social actors from groups made of other social actors. It is also responsible for denying the contribution of a social actor to particular *actions*, as well as for denying the ascription of certain *attributes* to a social actor. The following example is an instance of the dissociation of Iran from a group of associated social actors consisting of Britain, the United States, and France:

> **Britain, the United States, and France send warships through strait of Hormuz in a warning to the Iranian regime which has threatened to close the passage.**

In this study, the dissociation of social actors from one another as proposed by Van Leeuwen (2008) as a type of association unformation is called *type I* dissociation. Similarly, the dissociation made among social actors without being necessarily the result of the unformation of a prior association is called *type II* dissociation. Finally, the dissociation detaching a social actor from an action or attribute is called *type III* dissociation.

In addition to the preceding classifications, association and dissociation can involve an additional dimension: being either *explicit* or *implicit.* As our data suggest, association and dissociation can be overtly made among social actors, together or in relation to actions and/or attributes—as it was the case in the aforementioned examples. They can also be established implicitly in the sense that they are understood from the text without being directly expressed. The following examples from Englishcentral shed light on the point:

> **a. Confronted by the serial deception of many years [on the side of Iran], the international community has no choice today but to draw a line in the sand.**

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In example a, Iran is explicitly associated with "deception" as an attribute (type II association).

> **b. President Obama said US, French, and British intelligence agencies discovered the [nuclear] site about 160 kilometers from Tehran.**

In example b, in addition to the association formed between Iran and performing nuclear activities, Iran is implicitly associated with the attribute of *dishonesty* in that it did not reveal all its nuclear sites to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Activation versus Passivation: During the initial phases of conducting data analysis, associations and dissociations made about Iran revealed to be the most frequently-used discursive mechanisms. However, as the study proceeded, we realized that these discursive strategies failed to explain some of the links present between social actors, mainly Iran in our case, and actions and attributes that were in one way or another related to them. For example, through association-dissociation-based analyses, it was found that Iran was associated with performing nuclear activities or dissociated from the US, but we could not explain the relation between Iran and the sanctions imposed on it by the US since sanctions were neither actions carried out by the Iranian officials, nor part of their attributes.

This could be explained by another dichotomous strategy in Van Leeuwen's model called "activation" versus "passivation," accurately explaining the place of Iran in social interactions. Here, activation is responsible for representing Iran as a "dynamic force" when engaged in some social practices while passivation places it at the "receiving end" of some others (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 33). With regard to the example of sanctions imposed on Iran, the activation and passivation strategies clearly demonstrate the Iran-US roles, placing the former in a passivated position and the latter in an activated one.

Personalization versus Impersonalization: Since social actors' representation is the focal point of this study, the way they are introduced to discourse is worth special attention. Indeed, the way social actors are represented as either human

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beings (*personalization*), or as concrete or abstract things (*impersonalization*) provides the primary, though probably unnoticed, impression on text readers (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 46). In other words, the way social actors are *nominated* (addressed via names) and/or *titulated* (assigned titles) in the former case, and the way they are *objectivated* in the latter case became the third basis for our analysis (Van Leeuwen, 2008, pp. 40-45).

Objectivation is realized through four mechanisms of *spatialization, utterance autonomization, instrumentalization, and somatization,* out of which only the first two are applied to this analysis because of their availability in our data. Spatialization demonstrates the replacement of human social actors with the names of places to which they are attributed, such as replacing Iranian officials with Iran. Spatialization is important in the present study because it shows how the agency and dynamic role of social actors is mitigated. Similarly, utterance autonomization conceals the social actors replacing them instead with surveys, reports, news, and the like. Lending a kind of impersonal authority to the utterances, this mechanism brings validity to the message due to its reliance on surveys, reports, etc. (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 46).

Procedures

Among a variety of video clips in Englishcentral website, the use of the keyword "Iran" led the researchers to 63 video clips whose transcripts comprised the corpus of the present study. Most of the video clips concerning Iran are presented as brief news excerpts. Others are interviews, speeches or reports about Iran. The persistent scrutiny into data, coding**,** thematizing and organizing the data in terms of common themes, and making categories out of the organized themes led to assigning the following names to the resulted categories: *Iran's military/nuclear activities, allies and opponents, convicting others of espionage, natural and human-inflicted disasters, deficiency in maintaining and promoting its human resources, terroristic plots, peculiarity, internal conflicts,* and *anti-US/UK rallies.* Closer examination of our data revealed that the word "Iran" was used to refer to three distinct social actors in Englishcentral, namely the *Iranian government, Iranian people,* and *the Iranian people and/or government/officials.* This formed a new basis for our data analysis so that all discursive mechanisms pertinent to Iran were informed by the three categories mentioned above. The third of the above-mentioned categories was devised to embrace cases where it was not clear if the reference made by the word

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Iran was the Iranian government or its people, or both of them. As a result, those elements of Van Leeuwen's model which were relevant to our research data and could address our objectives, as explained above, were adapted, expanded, and applied to our thematized data, focusing on Iran in the three aforementioned senses.

Data Analysis

All video transcripts about Iran were critically analyzed and remarkableresults were obtained. To save space, however, merely a few samples of the recognized themes which include the research discursive mechanisms are discussed below.

- **Iran's military/nuclear activities**

> **U.S. President Barack Obama called on Iran to come clean about its nuclear plans, following the news that it is building a previously undisclosed uranium enrichment facility.**

Implicature says that the use of "come clean" means that Iranian officials have not been honest about their nuclear plans up to that time. Here, the Iranian officials are implicitly dissociated from the attribute of honesty about "their nuclear plans" while they are explicitly associated with the action of "building a previously undisclosed uranium enrichment facility." The word "the news" is expected to establish utterance autonomization and thus to lend a kind of impersonal authority as well as support and validity to Obama's words.

With regard to the activation-passivation dichotomy, the Iranian officials are both activated and passivated; they are passivated in that they have become subject to Obama's advice while they are manifestly activated in relation to being unclear about their "nuclear plans" up to that time, as well as to "building a previously undisclosed uranium enrichment facility." This excerpt both nominates and titulates the US president but the Iranian officials are obscured via spatialization, substituted by their home country "Iran."

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- **Iran's convicting others of espionage**

> **The Iranian government releases US hikers Shane Bauer and Josh Fattal after over two years of imprisonment for *alleged* [emphasis added] espionage.**

In the above news, the Iranian officials are explicitly associated with charging US hikers with espionage, putting them in jail and then releasing them, without any mention being made of related judicial procedures (suppression)—the latter implying that the Iranian officials have probably made false accusations. In other words, the news connotes that Iran's claims with regard to the US spy affairs are probably unsubstantiated especially since the suspected Americans are introduced as simple "hikers," with the two-year imprisonment period raising even more sympathy for them, and the espionage is basically described as being "alleged."

This is an instance of type II association of the Iranian officials with the action of unreasonable conviction of American public. Here, the activation of the Iranian officials in relation to convicting two US hikers of spying entails the passivation of the latter and renders them subject to Iran's baseless accusation. In addition, the Iranian officials are merely recognized in terms of their profession (*functionalization*) while the US hikers are *identified* through their nationality, functionalized as "hikers," and fully nominated.

- **Iran's terroristic plots**

> **President Obama says the US has evidence to support its claim of Iranian involvement in an alleged plot to kill Saudi Arabia's ambassador to the US.**

Here, as in most excerpts in this website, the US government officials are fully nominated and titulated via honorifiers such as "President" complemented by their national affiliation. The Iranian officials and public, on the contrary, are depicted through mere spatialization. In this news, a serious charge is also made against Iran which explicitly associates it with "involvement in an alleged plot to kill Saudi Arabia's ambassador to the US" (type II association of Iran with an action). The US, however, is associated with making well-supported, fully-evidenced claims.

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Besides, the US is also associated with Saudi Arabia (type I) while Iran is dissociated from the two (type II dissociation from two social actors).

This news activates both Obama in relation to his claim and Iranian officials/people with regard to an alleged assassination plan. Iran, however, is passivated in that it is subject to Obama's accusation, similar to Saudi Arabia's ambassador who is subject to an alleged assassination plot by Iran.

- **Iran's internal conflicts**

> **So far, the Iranian government has responded by demonstrating that it cares far more about preserving its own power than respecting the rights of Iranian people. (part of Obama's speech addressing Iranian people)**

What is salient in Obama's speech is his effort to polarize the discourse into the Iranian people and their government. Besides dissociating Iranian people from their government, the effort to "preserve power" at the expense of the Iranians' rights which connote selfish desires, is an instance of implicit, type II association formed with the Iranian government. The latter is also dissociated explicitly from the act of "respecting the rights of Iranian people." The Iranian government is openly activated with regard to the above-mentioned association and dissociation, with the Iranian people depicted as subject to them. No personalization is formed for either the Iranian government or people.

> **Iran's human-inflicted disasters the trafficking of persons . . ., Clinton says, is modern-day slavery and affects every country including the United States. The countries rated worst include . . . Iran, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Sudan.**

Although it is not deducible from the video clip, if the word "Iran" refers to the Iranian officials or people, it more likely refers to the former since it is usually the government that is held accountable for unlawful immigration and human trafficking. Here, a type II association is explicitly made between Iran and the action of human trafficking as well as type I association that is responsible for

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linking Iran to the so-called worst-rated countries listed above. Iran is introduced as an active force in "modern-day slavery" while "every country including the United States" is represented as subject to this ominous phenomenon. The only nomination in this news belongs to Clinton who is the sole speaker legitimized by Englishcentral to voice the world concerns on human trafficking.

Results

Iran's military-nuclear program consisting of 27 video clips made the largest category in our corpus. This indicates that Iran's military-nuclear program (the way it is represented in Englishcentral) is displayed as the most typical characteristic of Iran. The frequencies and percentages of other categories are provided in the following table:

Table 1

Frequency and percentage of thematically-categorized video clips about Iran

Category	Frequency of video clips	Percentage of video clips
Military/nuclear activities	27	36.48
Allies and opponents	11	14.86
Convicting others of espionage	6	8.10
Natural and human-inflicted disasters	5	6.75
Deficiency in promoting and maintaining its human resources	4	5.40
Terroristic plots	3	4.05
Miscellaneous issues suggesting peculiarity of Iranians	3	4.05
Internal conflicts	2	2.70
Anti-US/UK rallies	2	2.70
Total	63	85.09

Within these nine categories, associations and dissociations formed between Iran, in any of its three meanings, and other social actors, actions, and attributes were examined. Since the resulting lists are too long to be included here, very brief samples are introduced below to depict how different dimensions were taken into account in our analyses.

Associations: Attracting the largest number of video clips, the *Iranian government* is the central focus of Iran-related issues in Englishcentral. A glimpse at the sample associations in Table 2 below shows the dark portrayal of the Iranian government. Concerning the Iranian officials' associations with actions, Iran's nuclear/military

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activities rank the highest (55%), convicting US of spionage ranks second (20%), depriving Iranians of their liberty (15%) ranks third, and threatening Iraq (10%) is the fourth. Englishcentral has been explicit in 75% of action associations with Iran and implicit in the remaining 25%. With regard to attributes associated with the Iranian government, Iran's nuclear/military program stands in the first place (68.18%), being undemocratic (22.72%) and having internal conflicts (9.09%) respectively rank the second and the third. The percentage of explicit and implicit associations of Iran with the preceding attributes is respectively 59.09% and 40.90%.

Table 2
Sample associations with the Iranian government/officials

Social actor's association	Explicit	Implicit
Type I: social actor	North Korea, Al-Qaida, Syria, Hugo Chavez, Raul Castro, Muammar Gaddafi, Syria's President Assad	—
Type II: Action	testing missiles, obtaining nuclear weapons, sentencing an American to death on charge of spying	keeping the US aircraft for no good reason, denying its people's right to freedom, threatening Iraq's stability
Type III: Attribute	being deceitful, disdainful, fearful, accountable for violating international rules	isolation, unlawfulness and incongruity, being inconsiderate about its people's problems and international rules

Iranian people, on the other hand, are associated with Obama for the alleged support Obama promised them and with Egyptians for their opposition against their governments. Our data reveal that Iranian people are represented as being involved in these actions in general: anti-US/UK demonstrations (30.76 %), doing peculiar things (23.07 %), unlawful immigration (7.69%), and mistreating animals (7.69%). However, when they are called on to oppose their government, they are admired for positive actions all entailing "building the future of Iran" (30%).With regard to the attribute association, 25% of the excerpts center on Iranians' anti-US/UK

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attitudes, 50% laud the Iranian people for their great history and civilization, and the remaining 25% are about their physiological damages. Action associations are explicit in 81.81% and implicit in 18.18% of the excerpts but all attribute associations are explicit. Among the social actors associated with the *Iranian government or/and its people*, the terrorist group "Al-Qaida" is included in relation to terroristic activities, Syria for conflict with Syrians as well as for human trafficking, North Korea for performing uncivilian nuclear activities as well as for human trafficking, and a group of other social actors for human trafficking. All the actions associated with Iran from involvement in terroristic operations to human trafficking carry with them negative impressions. Even the word "revolution" which stands for the "Islamic Revolution of Iran" is represented as a disastrous point in the Iranian history. Lastly, having internal conflicts is the only attribute association made with this definition of Iran.

The same categorical explanations as those provided for Iran's associations are applied to Iran's dissociations. Similar to associations, the *Iranian government* has attracted the most dissociated social actors, actions, and attributes.

Dissociations: There are seventeen social actors dissociated from the Iranian government for limited reasons: The Iranian government is dissociated from Egypt for lack of diplomatic relations after the Islamic Revolution, from Iraq for interfering in its internal affairs, from Iranian people for denying them their liberty, and from the rest for its nuclear program. It is also dissociated from a series of positive actions and attributes, a few examples of which are provided in Table 3 below, all resulting in an unfavorable characterization of the Iranian government.

Iranian people are dissociated from only two social actors: from London in relation to imposing new sanctions on Iran and from the Iranian government for the supposed denial of its right to freedom. The latter denial also leads to the dissociation of Iranians from the attribute of having freedom. Concerning the *Iranian government and/or people*, there is only one case of type II dissociation from the Muslim community.

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Table 3
Sample dissociations from the Iranian government

Social actor's dissociation	Explicit	Implicit
Type I: social actor	—	—
Type II: social actor	the US President Barack Obama, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, French President Nicolas Sarkozy, Iranian people, Iraq	UN's watchdog, IAEA
Type III: action	fulfilling national obligations, living up to international responsibility, revealing all its nuclear related activities, respecting the rights of Iranian people	promoting the Iranian talents
Type III attribute	winning the confidence of the international community, honesty in its nuclear plans, possessing working technology	strength, liberty

Activations and passivations: Similar analyses were conducted to find out how and in which contexts Iran, in any of its three meanings, is activated or passivated. Most instances of these mechanisms were recognized in relation to the Iranian government, confirming our findings in association-dissociation discussions that the Iranian government, as it was unpleasantly represented, has been the focus of Iran-related video clips in Englishcentral (see Table 4).

With regard to social actors, the *Iranian government* is represented as a dynamic force (activated) in 34% of its interactions with other social actors while it is represented as a target to the force of other social actors (passivated) in 65.78% of its interactions. Concerning actions, Iran is assigned an active role in 81.39% of excerpts where it is represented as performing almost always negative actions. It is passivated for being target to sanctions in 18.60% of the excerpts. With respect to attributes, Iran is activated with negative attributes in 65.62% of excerpts while it is passivated in 34.37% of excerpts; the former assigning it unpleasant qualities and the latter targeting it to international accusations, expectations and falsifications.

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Table 4
Sample activation and passivation of the Iranian government/officials

The Iranian government/officials	Activation	Passivation
Social actor	Hugo Chavez, Russian Foreign Minister, Iranian people	US President; British intelligence agencies, Israeli Prime Minister
Action	building a previously undisclosed uranium enrichment facility, obtaining nuclear weapons	implementing new sanctions suggested by the US and UK; oil ban,; threat to military war
Attribute	being deceitful, disdainful, a threat to US security, undemocratic	being the US concern, being target to the threat to a probable military war

The *Iranian people* were activated in relation to a variety of actions, most frequently for holding anti/US-UK demonstrations (44.44% of related excerpts). With regard to attributes, they are activated with admiration for gaining success when living outside of Iran (25%) and for opposing their government (75%). Iranians are also passivated for being subject to terrorism (25%), sanctions (25%), and their government's misconduct (50%).

The activation of the *Iranian government and/or people* produce similar results in that the social actors are activated for involvement in negative actions such as terroristic plots, human trafficking, and the revolution. Naturally, people who are target to their terroristic plots are placed in a passivated position. In general, Iran is mostly activated in relation to its nuclear activities and passivated mainly in relation to the sanctions resulted from the same activities. This suggests that it is Iran's *actions* which result in international *reactions* influencing the Iranian government and its people.

Personalization and impersonalization: Iran as a general key term is repeated in Englishcentral 104 times with Iranian officials being very rarely personalized: The Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was cited only once and the then Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadi Nejad was cited four times, both in nominated and titulated forms. It is noteworthy that while these results were achieved through the use of "Iran" as the keyword, the US officials appeared more in the excerpts

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than the Iranian ones: US President Obama was present 11 times, Secretary of the State Clinton was there seven times, and the US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta and Obama's nominee for the US Secretary of Defense, Senator Hagel, are each quoted once. They were also nominated and titulated in all cases.

Iranian officials are spatialized 24 times with either "Iran" (21 cases) or "Tehran" (three cases). Comparing this against their personalization rate that is only five times, one can conclude that the Iranian officials are more spatialized than nominated in Englishcentral. After Iran, the US officials rank second, with seven cases of spatialization, indicating that Englishcentral tends more to personalize rather than to spatialize US social actors. According to Van Leeuwen (2008, p. 47), impersonalization, in any of its forms, can "background the identity and/or role of social actors" and "lend an impersonal authority or force to an action or quality of a social actor." As such, one can conclude that the large number of impersonalization cases leads to more obscurity of the Iranian officials. With respect to personalization, whenever the Iranian social actors are nominated, although in very few cases, they are also titulated and affiliated, similar to other social actors. There also seems to be no major difference between Iran and other social actors concerning the application of utterance autonomization.

Discussion

As our data analysis reveals, there exists a large number of news excerpts about Iran in Englishcentral, associating it with issues such as nuclear programs, sanctions, internal conflicts, espionage crimes, assassinations, terroristic activities, human trafficking, and the like. The minimum influence of such offensive news, even if they are very optimistically—better to say naively—taken as an absolute reflection of sheer reality, is the harsh, provocative picture they display of Iran.

What is far more significant is that Englishcentral introduces itself as an English educational website with specific focus on listening and speaking skills; however, its systematically biased discourse promotes particular views mainly in the area of politics. The policy of Englishcentral in offering discourses which promote particular views– often those of the US-affiliated news agency "VoA"–is unlikely to be an accident. All throughout the analyzed excerpts, the voice of the powerful, "core" countries (Pennycook, 2007), often in association with each other, was

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broadcast against Iran, which was represented as an isolated, alien rebel battling and threatening the whole world. This type of representation of Iran, although common in Western media (see for example, Behnam & Moshtaghi Zenouz, 2008; Rashidi & Rasti, 2012; Zolfaghar Roshan, 2010), is in sheer contradiction with the fundamental principles of materials development in that the educational materials have to meet the primary conditions of plurality, fairness and impartiality (Killoran, et al., 2004; Mahoney & Schomber, 2004; Wasson & Jackson, 2002).

Using particularly restricted news, Englishcentral legitimizes those political perspectives that are produced and acknowledged by VoA. Although the video clips analyzed in the present study are all about Iran, the voice of the Iranian-affiliated media is conspicuously excluded. This leads to the biased presentation of political views and unfair distribution of related information in a so-called context of English learning. While the use of the news in an educational website is indeed suspicious, once the news is included for any reason, they are at least expected to maintain balance in presentation of different views. In other words, since no political news is neutral (Fowler, 1991; McPhail, 2006), Englishcentral would prove to be impartial if it quoted for and against views from a variety of news sources.

The policy of Englishcentral in utilizing news is significant in that news excerpts, especially those extracted from news headings, are typically characterized for being economically concise and highly informative (Conboy, 2010; Fowler, 1991). As such, very brief pieces of news are able to convey a great deal of information. Nevertheless, this is unlikely to be the only justification for the use of news since Englishcentral is selective in publishing the news of particular orientations and affiliations. All these reasons can lead us to decide that inculcating in learners' minds certain (political) views that are latent in English educational materials is a hidden agenda (Martin, 1983) which reflects particular values, attitudes, and beliefs (Arkian, 2008; Gray, 2000; Holme, 2003, Kilickaya, 2004; Sadeghy, 2008) and of which both English learners and teachers must be aware.

Keeping the trace of Englishcentral discursive mechanisms, this study demonstrates that the cultural and ideological hegemony of the core countries over the rest of the world, as discussed by such scholars as Canagarajah (1999), Fairclough (2006), Pennycook (2007) and Phillipson (1992, 2009), persists to be enhanced by global English education, especially through the Internet-mediated

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programs. While the unrivaled dynamics and possibilities of the Internet-mediated ELT as a new phenomenon has attracted many people in our field, the critical investigation and application of such programs is definitely needed. 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, image, color, context, different aspects of hidden agenda such as politics, family and social values, culture, economic revenues, globalization, imperialistic and colonial ambitions, and many other aspects.

Conclusion

The present study attempted to track down the hidden curriculum in an Internet-mediated English educational program, called Englishcentral, through CDA. Applying an adapted version of Van Leeuwen's (2008) Social Actor Network, the researchers found that Englishcentral portrayed an unpleasant picture of Iran through particular discursive mechanisms. This can serve the formation of a new mentality in English learners, disguised behind the neat label of free, Internet-mediated education. This also proves to be in line with the concerns of the concept of hidden curriculum which argues 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)

Inspired by the findings of the present research, one can suggest that despite their facilities and attractions, English educational websites must be treated with more caution by English teachers and learners because long term exposure to such alien messages helps the formation of a new mentality which is to detriment of individuals' perception of their identity and national sovereignty (Ehrensal, 2001; McPhail, 2006; Spring 2009). The continued reception of these messages, McPhail (2006) points out, tends to mould the minds of the young people to the ideals and opinions rooted in the Western culture and ideology. This study suggests that the significance of the role of technology in enhancing teaching-learning process should by no means close our eyes to the potential threats of the modern technology for the national sovereignty and local identity of English teachers and learners.

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In the light of the findings of the present study, curriculum and syllabus designers as well as materials developers may acknowledge the urgent need for developing locally-produced (Bashir, 2011; Chen, Eslami, & Shin, 2011; Cortazzi & Jin, 1999; Kiss & Weninger, 2013; McKay, 2003; Naji & Pishghadam, 2012), Internet-enhanced English educational programs. Such programs can both enjoy the attractions and facilities of incorporating the new technology in English education and remove, or at least decrease, the hegemonic threats of those programs currently present on the Web. Furthermore, course designers, materials developers and English teachers who like to incorporate the English programs which are currently available on the Web, before they initiate locally-oriented materials, are recommended to select such materials with more critical awareness, care and caution.

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