

اللغة والتهجير والتفاوض الثقافي في مسرحية *English* لساناز توسي: دراسة في ضوء
العبرلغوية ونظرية الهوية

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الكلمات المفتاحية: العبرلغوية؛ الهوية؛ التهجير، ساناز توسي، نظرية

كيفية اقتباس البحث

عبد ، وسام ذياب، اللغة والتهجير والتفاوض الثقافي في مسرحية English لساناز توسي:
دراسة في ضوء العبرلغوية ونظرية الهوية، مجلة مركز بابل للدراسات الانسانية، آب
2026، المجلد: 16، العدد: 8.

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Language, Displacement, and Cultural Negotiation in Sanaz Toossi's *English: A Study through Translingualism and Identity Theory*

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Keywords : Translingualism; Identity; Displacement, Sanaz Toossi's ,Theory.

How To Cite This Article

Abid, Wissam Theyab , Language, Displacement, and Cultural Negotiation in Sanaz Toossi's *English: A Study through Translingualism and Identity Theory*, Journal Of Babylon Center For Humanities Studies, Auguts 2026, Volume:16, Issue8.



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المستخلص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى فحص العلاقة المتشابكة بين اللغة، والتهجير، والتفاوض الثقافي في مسرحية *English* للكاتبة ساناز توسي، وذلك من خلال توظيف نظريتي العبرلغوية ونظرية الهوية. تسعى الدراسة الحالية إلى استكشاف العلاقات المعقدة بين استخدام الشخصيات للغة الإنجليزية بوصفها أداة درامية للتفاوض حول هوياتهم في مواجهة الاغتراب الثقافي والتهجير. تبحث هذه الورقة في الكيفية التي توظف بها الشخصيات اللغتين الإنجليزية والفارسية للتعبير عن الإحساس بالانتماء، والطموح، أو الشعور بالاغتراب عن الآخرين. وتُظهر الدراسة أن اللغة الإنجليزية تبرز بوصفها لغة ملتبسة؛ إذ تمنح الأفراد فرصاً للارتقاء الاجتماعي والحياتي، لكنها في الوقت نفسه تخلق قلقاً لغوياً، وصمتاً، وانقساماً في الهوية. تعمل قاعة الدرس كرمزاً للسلطة والانضباط. وتساعد نظرية العبرلغوية في فهم أن التجارب متعددة اللغات ليست فقط مرنة وإبداعية، بل قد تكون أيضاً محفوفة بالمخاطر وغير متكافئة أحياناً. كما تجادل الدراسة، من

خلال نظرية الهوية، بأن عملية تعريف الذات داخل السياق متعدد اللغات هي عملية تفاعلية وأدائية بطبيعتها. في الوقت نفسه، يُقدّم مفهوم نظرية الهوية مفتاحاً لفهم سبب اعتبار المسرحية سرداً درامياً. فبخلاف العرق أو الجنسية، لا تُعدّ الهوية أمراً مُعطى أو ثابتاً أو مُفرداً؛ بل تُبنى من خلال التفاعل الاجتماعي واللغوي، وفقاً لبوتشولتز وهول (2005). علاوة على ذلك، يُشير مفهوم بتلر للأداء إلى أن الهوية تحتاج إلى ممارسة متكررة بدلاً من مجرد امتلاكها (بتلر، 1988). لذا، يتخذ أبطال مسرحية طوسي هويات بديلة تبعاً لما إذا كانوا يتحدثون الإنجليزية أو الفارسية، أو يتبعون قواعد السلوك أو يتجاهلونهم، أو يبقون في بلدانهم أو يسافرون إلى أماكن أخرى.

Abstract

In order to examine the complex interrelationship between language, displacement, and culture negotiation in Sanaz Toossi's work, English in her works will be examined via the theories of translingualism and identity theory. This study attempts to explore the complex relationships between characters' use of English as a dramaturgical device in negotiating their identities in the face of cultural dislocation and displacement. This paper investigates how characters utilize their English and Farsi in expressing their sense of belonging, aspiration, or feeling alienated from others. English emerges as ambivalent because it creates linguistic anxiety, silencing, and split identity. The classroom serves as a symbol of power and discipline. Translingual theory helps understand that multilingual experiences are not only fluid and creative, but also risky and unequal at times. Using identity theory, the paper argues that the process of self-definition within the multilingual context is interactive and performative in nature. At the same time, the notion of identity theory provides the key to comprehending why the play is considered a dramatic narrative. Unlike ethnicity or nationality, identity is not something given, static, or singular; it is constructed through social and linguistic interaction, according to Bucholtz and Hall (2005). Besides, Butler's concept of performativity states that identity needs to be repeatedly performed rather than just owned (Butler, 1988). Therefore, the people in Toossi's play assume alternative identities depending on whether they are talking English or Farsi, following rules of behavior or ignoring them, and staying in their countries or going elsewhere.



1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

Sanaz Toossi's *English*, rather than viewing language as a medium for communication, sees it as a platform for exploring issues of identity, displacement, memory, belonging, and cultural loss. This play is set in a TOEFL class in Karaj, Iran, in 2008 and centers around four Iranians learning English under the guidance of Marjan, the English teacher who maintains the rule that students should speak English only in class. While the structure of the play is focused on learning a language, the more important dramatic question is how a new language affects one's self and his or her connection to home, family, ambitions, and cultural memories. This drama won the 2023 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, and literary experts have emphasized that the author's focus on language, self, and internal displacement caused by English is key.

In terms of literature, the role of *English* in Toossi's work consists in turning the classroom into a stage for negotiating cultures. The characters depicted in the play are not learners taking a test but people whose lives, futures, allegiances, and identities depend on mastering a language. For example, the character called Elham struggles to learn English because of his desire to move to another country to earn more money and avoid embarrassment connected with a lack of linguistic skills. Roya hopes to learn English due to being separated from her family and wishing to talk to her granddaughter abroad. Omid speaks English fluently but this does not help him feel at home as he wishes to. Marjan has learned English well and suffers because of this.

Thus, it can be concluded that *English* is viewed as a literary piece of theater that presents a case of translingualism. It is not important from a strictly linguistic perspective but translingualism provides a valuable framework since it will help understand how people represented in literature use languages. According to Li Wei (2018), a person who is fluent in several languages does not switch from one language system to another; on the contrary, multilinguals develop rich linguistic repertoires to convey messages. In the play under consideration, this process is performed in dramatic terms and the characters switch from speaking English to speaking Farsi because of the emotions triggered by the former.

At the same time, the notion of identity theory provides the key to comprehending why the play is considered a dramatic narrative. Unlike ethnicity or nationality, identity is not something given, static, or singular; it is constructed through social and linguistic interaction, according to Bucholtz and Hall (2005). Besides, Butler's concept of performativity states that identity needs to be repeatedly performed rather than just owned (Butler, 1988). Therefore, the people in Toossi's play assume alternative identities depending on whether they are talking English or Farsi, following rules of behavior or ignoring them, and staying in their countries or going elsewhere.

1.2 Problem of the Study

A major question raised in the play is that of interpreting *English* beyond the context of language learning. Even though the scene of learning takes place in an English-speaking classroom, the power of the play is not limited to grammar, pronunciation, or preparations for exams. Instead, in the work of Toossi, language learning emerges as a literary tool of revealing deeper themes like those of identity, displacement, culture, and self-translation. Therefore, viewing the play simply as one on language acquisition would be detrimental to its literary value.

This problem becomes particularly salient because of the ambivalent nature of English within the story. On the one hand, English serves as a marker of mobility, education, migration, reunion with relatives, and freedom. On the other hand, it represents loss, alienation, humiliation, and cultural suppression. The ambivalence resonates with the notion of the displacement of languages and cultures under English-speaking regimes that consider the English language as a means of gaining legitimacy and mobility, as explained by Tavares (2024).

In addition, the theme of displacement in Toossi's play is important since it involves much more than the physical migration of characters. While some characters plan to leave their country, Iran, all of them experience pre-migration displacement and division in terms of the two languages. As per Dovchin (2025), the translingual experience can be precarious rather than creative for people who do not have equal standing in the system of linguistic hierarchy. The idea seems relevant to English, especially in the case of Toossi's characters.



For this reason, it is possible to state the following research question: how does Sanaz Toossi's English dramatize the interplay between language, displacement, and cultural negotiation in translingual identity formation? In the analysis, the play will be considered as a literary text with language at its center.

1.3 Aim of the Study

In the current research, the representation of language as a place of displacement in Sanaz Toossi's work will be analyzed. Namely, the play is going to be scrutinized through the lens of the interplay between the characters and the language they speak; how English is used for negotiation and how identity, belonging, and loss are conveyed in their relationship with English.

To begin with, it is worth considering how translingual experience is utilized by Toossi in her play as an artistic technique. Specifically, the focus will be on the way the notion of translinguality is represented, not just linguistically but culturally and dramatically as well; how the characters negotiate their identity and future aspirations, as well as fears connected to their identity, in relation to English and their other language, i.e., Farsi.

In addition, the paper will also examine how *English* can articulate displacement both externally and internally. While the characters' relationship with English is related to such notions as migration, education, family, and mobility, there are also aspects of displacement that refer to being displaced inside oneself, such as estrangement from one's own voice, lack of clarity on the issue of belonging, and cultural metamorphosis.

1.4 Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does Sanaz Toossi's *English* dramatize the relationship between language, displacement, and cultural negotiation?
2. In what ways does the play represent English as both a source of opportunity and a source of alienation?
3. How do the characters negotiate identity through their movement between English, Farsi, silence, hesitation, and performance?
4. How does the classroom setting function as a symbolic space of cultural pressure, aspiration, and self-transformation?

5. How can translingualism and identity theory help interpret the dramatic representation of belonging, loss, and agency in *English*?

1.5 Significance of the Study

The importance of this research lies in its focus on understanding *English* as a literary work, where language, displacement, and identity constitute the core elements of a dramatic experience. Instead of looking at the play as an instance of teaching English, the study focuses on the transformation of the subject into a dramatic construct, in which the struggle for cultural and emotional identity becomes evident. This is significant since *English* becomes another example of contemporary dramas exploring the issues of migration, multilingualism, and cultural negotiations as both social and artistic concerns.

The study is theoretically grounded since it includes translingual and identity theories in the interpretation of drama. According to Hugueny-Léger (2024), creative translingual writing can be critical and self-reflexive, whereas Edwards (2024) suggests that the stories crossing languages and national borders are necessary. From this perspective, Toossi's play turns out to be yet another story about crossing linguistic borders through language. Thus, in *English*, language carries the weight of aspirations, shame, intimacies, resistances, and even revisions of oneself.

Performance plays a key role in shaping individual identities in *English*. Since the drama in question is a play, the performance aspect of language should not be overlooked. Thus, accent, pauses, silence, repetitions, and even code-switching turn out to be the markers of inner conflict. The notion of performativity by Butler (1988) is applicable to the case as well, given that the characters do not "possess" their identities but perform them in social situations and interactions. Bucholtz and Hall's identity as interaction perspective (2005) also fits the context as it explains how students' identities are negotiated in class.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Translingualism

Firstly, translingualism would be a proper way to read Toossi's *English* since it represents a perspective on language as a contested area of identification, displacement, and cultural negotiation instead of seeing language as an impartial means of communication. In the context of this



paper, translingualism should not be used in its linguistic and pedagogical sense. Translingual theory will help to reveal the implications that the author makes when describing the emotional and symbolic consequences of bilingual experience with the help of characters struggling with the relationship between different languages.

Translingualism contradicts the perception of languages as isolated, fixed, and stable systems. According to Horner et al. (2011), translingualism allows considering language difference as a tool for communication and not as a weakness. The concept is crucial for English studies since any accent, hesitation, silence, and mistakes are not just the signs of incompetence but a more profound reflection of struggle for recognition and identity. Also, Li Wei (2018) states that people speaking several languages do not change their position from one language system to another but use different linguistic repertoires. It should be mentioned that, despite the fact that it cannot be considered as a linguistic example, the described situation in the play is relevant due to the same logic.

Moreover, in literary studies, translingualism is an effective approach to interpret texts reflecting hybrid, divided, or negotiated identities. Lvovich and Kellman (2015) define literary translingualism as a branch of literary studies engaged in multilingual identity and creativity, where language choice is the part of one's self. As can be seen in the analyzed play, *English* is related to ambition, imagination of freedom and migration, while Farsi is connected with intimate moments and memories. The classroom turns out to be the place of testing of new identity.

Translingualism should not be romanticized as merely freedom and creativity. According to Dovchin (2025), translingual experience could be precarious, unequal, and vulnerable. All these traits find their reflection in Toossi's play as shown through the feelings of embarrassment, correction, silence, and frustration of the characters. English may afford characters their future life prospects, but at the same time, it makes them vulnerable and insecure. Thus, *English* is associated with professional success and humiliation for Elham; separation of families for Roya; complicated belonging for Omid; and migration, return, and loss for Marjan.

From the perspective of translingual studies, the classroom becomes a symbolic space of language dominance and power. Besides being a site of instruction, it is a highly controlled linguistic environment where English dominates while Farsi is marginalized. "English only" policy reflects the

conflict between the imposed discipline and the authentic experience of the students. As stated by Tavares (2024), dominant English-language systems have the capacity to dominate other languages and cultures once they become associated with mobility, legitimacy, and power. In this case, dominance is social and internal as characters feel forced to use English in order to speak about what they feel in Farsi.

Powerful aspects are also associated with translingualism. Speaking English is the representation of the power of mobility and English-speaking countries. English proficiency is not only an indicator of good command of a language, but also of access to the English-speaking world where one has more chances to be recognized than in another place. According to Hugueny-Léger (2024), translingual creative writing shows the instability of linguistic and cultural borders. In Toossi's play, language becomes a performance, struggle, silence, hesitation, and self-revision experienced by the audience.

Thus, translingualism becomes crucial to this research as it allows for understanding English not as the foreign language experience in literature, but as a way to analyze the consequences of using two languages on the emotional and cultural level.

2.2 Identity Theory

Identity theory is indispensable when interpreting the role played by English in the play *English* because of the fluidity, relativity, and contextual nature of identity construction discussed in the play. The identities of the characters are not stable but are constantly changing depending on the use of either English or Farsi, thoughts about staying in Iran or leaving, and whether one seems competent, successful, up-to-date, foreign, and culturally loyal. As a result, identity becomes a dynamic process rather than a static property.

According to Burke and Stets (2000), the self-concept is developed in interactions between people. It can be argued that identity involves identification of the meanings people give to themselves and others depending on social roles and groups of belonging. This notion is applicable to the analysis of the play since everyone's relations to English presuppose a potential future identity: a migrant, a professional, a student, cosmopolitan subjects, or a family member associated with migration.



Social structuring is an aspect of identity discussed by scholars such as Howard (2000). They note that the identity is composed of personal understanding and broader forces that determine it. Thus, English as a language of success and mobility has power in the text. It is not only a means of communication; it is also connected to the ideas of dignity, shame, social and sexual status, and the need to be recognized.

Performative nature of identity is emphasized in the text because of the dramatic context. As Butler (1988) explains, identity is created through the performative repetition of acts. In *English*, the characters repeat pronunciations, try to appear fluent, hide Farsi, and work hard to develop identities that do not belong to them. Thus, *English* can be viewed as a performed identity characterized by the pressure to become part of another linguistic and cultural environment.

According to Bucholtz & Hall (2005), identity is created through interaction, positioning, and difference. Such a case is seen in *English* where the frustrations of Elham, the vulnerability of Roya, the ambivalence of Omid's fluency, and the authoritative nature of Marjan lead to correction, comparison, evaluation, judgment, and even resistance. In this way, identity in *English* becomes dialogic. This means that identity is shaped based on how other people perceive, hear, judge, and respond to an individual.

The idea of narrative identity theory further helps understand the identity formation process presented in the play. According to McAdams & McLean (2013), a narrative identity refers to the constantly changing story of a person's life where he or she incorporates the past, the present, and the imagined future. In the context of the play, the characters are not only learning English; they are recreating their histories. English becomes related to immigration, hope, family reintegration, and self-renewal whereas Farsi is connected to feelings and memories. As McAdams (2019) points out, identity is shaped through the use of narratives people create to make sense of their existence. Therefore, language in the play shapes not only what a person can say but also what he or she can become.

Identity theory can help interpret the concept of displacement used in the play. According to Vignoles et al. (2011), identity should always be interpreted in terms of interactions between self-definitional factors and social contexts. In *English*, the characters have left Iran physically but

they remain there emotionally. The play depicts how their identities become displaced as they struggle between belonging and leaving, between attachment and hope, between Farsi and English.

3. Literature Review

As a medium of communication, language is becoming more and more recognized as a site of negotiation between displaced subjects and the questions of memory, belongingness, and selfhood. One could mention here Maher's analysis of second-generation literature, in which the scholar argues that English carries the weight of intergenerational trauma and highlights difficulties of translating inherited losses in a language that is never apathetic (Maher, 2024). What is interesting is that Toossi's play also exemplifies a similar approach to language as a means of negotiating identity. Namely, the issues connected with the process of learning English do not reduce to the problem of pronunciation and vocabulary. Instead, language becomes an important site that represents the problems related to emotional inheritance, separation of family members, aspiration to learn something new, and vulnerability caused by the necessity of adopting a host language.

Another important source to consider in regard to understanding the significance of language in English would be Kalan's work, which focuses on analyzing immigrant experience related to writing and expressing thoughts in a host language. Namely, the author suggests that the process of expression in host language is determined by a number of factors, including institutional pressure, cultural translation, and resistance to assimilation (Kalan, 2024). While Kalan studies poetry rather than drama, his theoretical framework proves to be useful for understanding the significance of language in English. The classroom setting becomes a perfect example of a regulated space that facilitates mastering English. At the same time, English turns out to be the means of transforming speakers and changing how they communicate, think, remember, and present their identities.

The recent research on the phenomenon of translinguaging and its effects on identity should also be considered when interpreting the meaning of language in English. According to Almashour's findings, translinguaging may facilitate identity formation and social integration for Jordanian graduate students, but it could also highlight stereotyping, institutional expectations, and pressures to conform to English-dominant context (Almashour, 2024). Thus, one could argue that Toossi explores the idea of conflicting relationship to the host language, which is neither fully





positive nor negative. English provides immigrants with the opportunity to migrate, obtain education, find professional success, and communicate with their families; however, it also creates conditions for the feeling of shame, embarrassment, hesitation, and even fear of being erased from English-dominant context.

The connection between migration and identity has also been examined in the contemporary context of refugees and displacement. As per the scoping review conducted by Shahimi, Block, and Alisic, youth from a refugee background tend to establish their identity by engaging with past, present, and future across multiple sociocultural environments (Shahimi et al., 2024). While it can be said that the characters in Toossi's novel do not necessarily have refugee experience, yet they exist in a space of anticipation before the event of displacement. They are physically in Iran, but emotionally connected to somewhere else – Australia, Canada, England, or the Western world. This implies internal displacement before migration takes place. They are not studying for an exam but experimenting with their future selves. Hence, in such a manner, the *English* play becomes a drama of transition in identity, where language becomes a means through which different futures are tested.

Mazzaferro's recent study on the themes of migration, subjectivity, and identity is also useful since it emphasizes that migrants or displaced subjects are not helpless victims of linguistic and sociopolitical structures; instead, they negotiate their position in highly unequal circumstances (Mazzaferro, 2025). This becomes extremely important to prevent reductive reading of Toossi's characters that sees them as simply victims of English. The characters in the play not only struggle with English but sometimes resist it. They joke, perform, fail, correct themselves, and even occasionally reject the imposed meaning. Hence, their struggle with English language does not indicate mere helplessness but also a certain kind of agency. In fact, even their hesitation and silence gain dramatic significance as long as they show the limits of translation.

The relationship between literary language and identity/displacement has been recently stressed in Iraqi scholarship. In an article of Wasit Journal for Human Sciences, Hussein and Salman argue that “complex explorations of identity, language, and displacement” are fought out in and through “struggles of bicultural identity” and “language negotiation” (Hussein and Salman, 2025). This idea is especially relevant to Toossi's *English*, as the play suggests how language is not a neutral vehicle for

communication, but a dramatic space in which we negotiate belonging, cultural anxiety, migration, and self-recognition.

Finally, contemporary academic discussions on translingual and transnational narratives are helpful because these highlight that multilingual identity is created through multiple languages, media, and cultures. For instance, according to Edwards, translingual narratives disrupt the boundaries of nations and languages as they describe experiences that exceed one linguistic culture (Edwards, 2024). This discussion turns out to be very helpful when discussing Toossi's play, as it is formally based on the theme of linguistic instability. It allows the viewers to realize that while some English words are in fact spoken in Farsi, others constitute real English. Therefore, there is no such thing as transparent language in the theatrical space.

In this light, the analysis conducted by Hugueny-Léger regarding translingual creative writing also suggests that translingual discourse may serve as a means for self-reflection on the instabilities of linguistic and cultural boundaries (Hugueny-Léger, 2024). The relevance of this research to Toossi's method is evident insofar as English is used as a means of staging linguistic and cultural experiences. By alternating between fluent speech, disruption of fluent speech, silence, and corrections, the playwright creates an architectural structure, in which language is a battlefield. The source of the dramatic tension in this case cannot be found only in the actions taking place in class but also in the uncertainty of voice and selfhood.

It should be noted that recent studies contribute substantially to our understanding of the relation between language and displacement. Rather than simply moving from one language to another, language can be seen as a locus of trauma, agency, social pressures, memory, and identity formation. Thus, this body of research is relevant for the analysis of *English*, but at the same time, it demonstrates a clear lack in literary analysis of the play. Recent studies discuss such aspects of language as migrant language experience, writing in host language, the identity of refugees, translingual creativity, and multilingual subjectivity. Nonetheless, none of them offers an adequate examination of how these issues are addressed via the dramatic representation of *English*.

Thus, the current study will be helpful in terms of providing a literary analysis of a contemporary play, in which language appears as a means of



staging identity as displacement and negotiation. As opposed to studies, which analyze language from sociolinguistic, educational, or integration perspectives, this paper concentrates on the representation of language in Toossi's dramatic literature. In other words, Toossi's *English* can be seen as a theatrical performance, in which language is staged as a means of performing, resisting, losing, and reconstructing personal identity.

4. Methodology

This research uses qualitative methodology and literary criticism to analyze the literary work *English* by Sanaz Toossi, in particular, in the context of the translingual approach and theories of identity. As it examines a literary work of fiction, the study does not require statistical and empirical approaches and rather focuses on close reading of *English* to show how the concepts of language, displacement, and cultural negotiation are presented through dialogue, characters' portrayal, silence, hesitation, and the dramaturgic environment of *English*.

The main literary work to be analyzed is Sanaz Toossi's *English* (2023). In analyzing *English*, the research concentrates on the characters' usage of the two languages – English and Farsi, affects associated with learning a new language, the role that English classrooms played as milieus of identity building, and conflict between cultures. In particular, the analysis will include scenes when English produces a conflict, shame, hope, rebellion, or personal metamorphosis for speakers of another language.

For theoretical support of the interpretation of the play and situating it in the context of contemporary literary studies, it will also be necessary to consult peer-reviewed articles dedicated to the issues of translingualism, identity theory, displacement, multilingual literature, and modern theater.

The method used to analyze the text is an interpretive and analytical one. Selected episodes from *English* are discussed against the background of the research questions formulated earlier in the paper.

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Language as Performance

In Sanaz Toossi's *English*, language takes on a performative rather than purely instrumental value. Language in the classroom is seen as a form of performance, during which characters embody different selves through English. This idea is introduced at the very beginning of the play, when



Marjan writes "English Only" on the board (Toossi, 2023, p. 1). The command goes beyond regulating activities within the classroom since it introduces the discipline of language in which Farsi-speaking characters have to subdue themselves.

Marjan's order that "English always" (Toossi, 2023, p. 2) emphasizes the nature of this discipline in terms of forcing students to change both what they say and how they present themselves to other people. Through an identity perspective, it can be interpreted as a form of performed selfhood, as the notion implies that identities are constituted through repetition and public acknowledgment rather than innate qualities of a person (Butler, 1988; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). In this way, English becomes a form of identity that needs to be inhabited with continuous adjustments and criticism.

The idea of performance as something separate from inner self is embodied in Goli's speech during her show-and-tell presentation. By stopping mid-sentence and stating that she "sound[s]" a certain way, she makes clear that performing in English creates distance between a person and their true self (Toossi, 2023, p. 4). It seems that she hears herself through the prism of English – she becomes alienated from her own voice through performing it. According to a translingual paradigm, English is no longer a rigid language but a fluid space in which identities are negotiated (Horner et al., 2011; Li Wei, 2018).

The concept of performance is explicitly stated in the role-playing game, in which Marjan says that role-play means "pretending to be someone else" (Toossi, 2023, p. 5). It is the case because throughout the play, performing English is equated with the process of transformation into another self. However, Elham refuses to accept the unnaturalness of this act and says that people should speak "with words that have meaning" (Toossi, 2023, p. 7). It means that although English enables communication, it is not able to fully convey the emotional authenticity of the speaker.

When Elham is in the office, the shame associated with her accent increases, where she refers to the accent as "a war crime" (Toossi, 2023, p. 12). While the exaggeration has comic effect, it shows how she sees her accent from the outside perspective of what others will perceive. When Marjan tells her to "be brave in English," (Toossi, 2023, p. 13), the perception of the language changes, and English becomes more of an



emotional risk than just a neutral language. This phenomenon is in line with the idea of translingual precarity as multilingual practices involve vulnerability, inequality, and exposure to judgment (Dovchin, 2025).

The role of Omid adds to this narrative in different ways. Even though he uses English with ease, it still does not solve the problem of identity crisis. In his statement, "I made you laugh. In English," (Toossi, 2023, p. 15), he recognizes the notion that English includes far more than grammar and vocabulary. The pleasure he gets from this discovery lies in the realization that he can become an emotionally active individual within English. However, it also poses the main question for the play: Does English open new dimensions for the self or create a whole new self which might be dissimilar from the real one?

Thus, in Toossi's play, *English* becomes a performance which is created through repetition, correction, imitation, hesitations, and reception by the audience. The characters know they are speaking to someone else, and the speech itself is exposed to others. Using translingualism and identity theories, one could say that language in English becomes a stage where displacement occurs both descriptively and performatively. English offers the characters an opportunity to be somewhere else, yet, at the same time, forces them to experience shame and other negative emotions.

5.2 Silence, Hesitation, and Linguistic Anxiety

English language serves as a place for the dramatization of linguistic anxiety and internal disruption in the form of silence and hesitation. Toossi shows that the problems with the language of the characters cannot be considered merely technical; it is about linguistic anxiety as language shapes how much of oneself can be articulated. Being situated in the translingual space of Farsi and English, the characters face disruptions, embarrassment, and failures in translating their inner thoughts into the English speech.

The hesitations are vividly illustrated by Goli's speech: "So I'm starting now – I should start now, right?" (Toossi, 2023, p. 2). This example clearly shows how speaking English immediately puts the speaker under pressure. At first sight, Goli is simply beginning an activity that is assigned at the lesson; on the other hand, she is entering the sphere in which she is expected to perform publicly, which can cause her failure to

articulate properly. Then she makes another comment: "I don't um I don't know how to say it in English?" (Toossi, 2023, p. 4). Her thought does exist; still, English fails to articulate it fully.

Elham's speech becomes a subject for linguistic anxiety to show up even more clearly. Speaking to Roya, she starts with: "It is like feeling – I think – This is unnatural" (Toossi, 2023, p. 7). This is an obvious sign of fluency problem. However, it is rather more about her emotional discomfort with having to speak in a language that does not allow expressing complicated ideas easily. With the help of identity theory, it becomes clear why she is hesitant about her speech in this language; she understands herself but feels that she looks more clumsy and less intelligent in English.

Moreover, silence and hesitation often become sites of shame. As for Elham, she admits during her office hour appointment that "I sort of lose my mind when I speak English" (Toossi, 2023, p. 12). This phrase demonstrates the direct link between her shame and English language. Besides linguistic anxiety, the issue is connected with the fear of judgement through language. Later she says: "Word is humiliation. I look it up" (Toossi, 2023, p. 13). Thus, this is quite ironic how the language that promises academic success gives a word for the very feeling it causes.

Roya's hesitations reveal a unique kind of linguistic anxiety. Roya's speaking English seems to result from her fear of separation from her family rather than academic ambition. When she says, "Nader and the wife want I speak in English with Claire" (Toossi, 2023, p. 7), there is an important emotional undertone in the imperfect phrase. Instead of being motivated to change through acquiring a new language, her learning of English becomes a means to maintain a relationship with her granddaughter. Hence, hesitation becomes a sign of displacement: the familial connection needs to be sustained in a language that is not wholly hers. It serves as a bridge to the granddaughter and as an indication of the estrangement caused by relocation.

The corrective actions of Marjan heighten the air of linguistic anxiety in class. While Marjan supports her learners, her role as the teacher implies linguistic authority. The frequent reminders, like "English, Elham" (Toossi, 2023, p. 5), show how quickly Farsi is cut short and corrected. The prevalent "English only" policy in the classroom turns hesitations





into an observable issue, putting the speakers' entire identity at risk depending on the quality of their English skills.

These moments of silence and hesitation expose the instability of bilingual existence through the theory of translingualism. They also indicate through identity theory the close association between language and dignity. Linguistic anxiety, therefore, becomes in the novel not a side but a crucial dramatization of displacement. Silence in English carries just as much meaning as any spoken phrase because it highlights the emotional toll of becoming visible in a second language.

5.3 Negotiating Identity through Language

In this case, English identity cannot be seen as constant because of the dynamic process through which the characters negotiate their identities through the alternations from Farsi to English. This point is emphasized through Toossi's use of the language system of the play through which moments of speaking English are accented whereas moments of Farsi speech are taken to be unaccented English. This example shows the dynamic nature of identity based on the choice of language.

The process begins with Golnaz's name. By saying, "Golnaz is my real name" (Toossi, 2023, p. 2), the character shows that naming becomes impossible in a multilingual setting because there is always an option to choose other names that reflect the situation better. It means that identity becomes constructed not only due to the inheritance of one's identity but according to the situations and choices of individuals. Through the theories of identity, this point can be understood through the lens of social construction of self-based on interactions.

The choice of language for communication in the family helps Roya navigate her own identity. In saying, "Nader and the wife want I speak in English with Claire" (Toossi, 2023, p. 7), the character demonstrates that English becomes an obligatory language in the family to ensure communication among relatives abroad. In the case under consideration, English is needed to maintain identity as a grandparent in the eyes of others. Moreover, the necessity to speak in English with Claire also shows the distance between members of the family.

Elham's identity is negotiated by refusing to accept English as the main language. In particular, this is shown in her statement, "This isn't how people speak" (Toossi, 2023, p. 7). Her opposition to using English is based not only on grammar rules but also on her opinion that such behavior reduces the range of expressions and, thus, deprives the person of some aspects of personality. Using the translingual perspective, this case illustrates that linguistic mobility may create new vulnerabilities for individuals.

Identity of Omid is relatively ambiguous because of his comfort with the English language. According to him, "I have a green card interview in Dubai next month" (Toossi, 2023, p. 10). The phrase suggests that language plays a pivotal role in migration and potential opportunities. Nonetheless, he does not become "elsewhere" because of his fluency; on the contrary, he stays in-between Iran and anticipated future somewhere else. Being comfortable speaking English, Omid gains mobility and becomes different from other people in the classroom. Hence, Toossi demonstrates that language proficiency is also one possible position in identity.

The identity of Marjan is constructed based on structures of authority and memory. Specifically, she tells Omid, "I lived in Manchester for nine years" (Toossi, 2023, p. 14). However, his statement, "You don't sound British" (Toossi, 2023, p. 14) disrupts her linguistic history. After living abroad, teaching English, and using it to control the class, Marjan's accent and language do not align with just one culture. Consequently, Marjan's identity can be described as translingual because it is formed during movement, return, memories, and partial belonging.

English as a Language provides an illustration of how English is used to renegotiate, test, and sometimes fragment the identity of people. The English language can be employed to imagine new possibilities for oneself, but it can also reflect loss, distance, and instabilities. Translingualism demonstrates that identity formation takes place between languages and cannot be reduced to the purity of a particular linguistic system. Considering the theory of identity, the play illustrates that identity emerges as a result of interaction, recognition, and performance.



5.4 Translingual Space as a Site of Agency

First and foremost, linguistic pressure is complemented in English language class settings with translingual phenomena wherein characters exhibit their agency through selection, resistance, remodeling, and reimagining of themselves via language. Although Marjan's "English Only" requirement might seem restrictive, there still exist certain opportunities within the scope of this class for experimenting with other kinds of identities, which would otherwise be out of reach outside of this specific setting. Translingual dynamics create a space that is simultaneously not limited to either English or Farsi and represents a transitional one where language is used to construct oneself.

This is illustrated, for example, by Goli's perception of English as a flexible entity. She claims that "English does not want to be poetry like Farsi. / It is like some rice. English is the rice. / You take some rice and you make the rice whatever you want" (Toossi, 2023, p. 4). This metaphor depicts English as malleable and practical rather than sacred and rigid. Unlike Farsi that is associated with the depth of poetry, English is considered something tangible and easy to manipulate into a desired shape. Therefore, it is suggested that English can be transformed into anything because one can "make" something of it despite lacking full mastery over the language.

Moreover, Marjan who views language learning as a way of making herself perceptible to other people. She argues that one learns language "to speak not only our needs but our wants. To speak our souls" (Toossi, 2023, p. 6). This quote summarizes the essence of the play concerning linguistic agency of the characters in question. The point is that speaking allows one to reveal one's inner self, thus becoming recognizable in terms of identity theory. In other words, being able to use language means being capable of presenting oneself to the world.

In addition, Roya who takes the classes of English because she wants to maintain communication with her granddaughter Claire. Specifically, she says: "My son and my daughter-in-law want me to speak to Claire in English. So here is Roya in class" (Toossi, 2023, p. 7). Her admission of attending classes of English seems to carry a lot of meaning, as it depicts her presence in the class as a voluntary step. She participates in English-speaking community to ensure that she will remain close to Claire despite living in an alien environment.



Finally, Omid demonstrates another type of agency, as his proficiency in English allows him to consider his future beyond language classes. When he says: "Respectfully, I have a right to think about my future, too" (Toossi, 2023, p. 10), English is used to resist linguistic pressure and to express himself. He contests the idea that English is needed only by those students who have difficulties with language. Instead, he makes it clear that he can imagine himself having a better life in the future thanks to language.

Although Elham regularly finds herself humiliated because of her English, she exhibits agency through resistance. For instance, her statement "I just wanted to tell you in my own words" (Toossi, 2023, p. 13) is crucial in expressing her desire to define herself. Elham does not deny the existence of English language, but she resists the oppression associated with it. Elham's resistance shows that agency in the play is not always fluent or strong. Agency can appear in frustration, refusal, and insistence to be heard despite linguistic mistakes.

As such, Toossi describes the translingual classroom as a paradoxical yet creative space. The characters are disciplined using English in the play, but at the same time, they are given an opportunity to investigate new ways of understanding themselves. Using the theory of translingualism, the classroom becomes the borderland where language is produced, resisted, and invented again. Identity theory suggests that the classroom works as the locus where the characters try to be recognized and seek future prospects. In English, agency does not equal proficiency in mastering another language; it means that one is capable of using language to establish connections.

6. Discussion

An analysis of Sanaz Toossi's use of English reveals that the play views language as a space where displacement and cultural negotiations take place even before migration. In particular, the first research question seeks to understand the portrayal of the interaction between language, displacement, and cultural negotiation. The results show that English is not depicted as an impartial language of communication but is presented as a factor of change of the characters' connections with their homeland, families, dreams, and self. The results are consistent with the theoretical framework that claims that translingualism makes it possible to view the play as a reflection on the act of living in-between languages, not just as



the acquisition of another language. The results state that "English both bridges and burdens," providing opportunities for movement while disrupting the sense of belonging and identity formation.

Secondly, the research question aims at understanding how English can be seen as an opportunity and a cause of alienation. A closer look at Elham, Roya, Omid, and Marjan suggests that English provides the possibility of access to imagined futures but also causes feelings such as shame, anxiety, and emotional remoteness. In the case of Elham, English provides opportunities in terms of academia and career, but at the same time, it brings humiliation and discomfort. For Roya, English is the language of love and connection with her family, but she must communicate with her granddaughter through the medium of English. Thus, the use of English shows the gap generated by migration. In Omid's case, English brings about mobility but disrupts the feeling of belonging in the classroom because fluent speakers are often perceived to belong in another place. Thus, the finding is consistent with Tavares's claim that English-dominant systems displace languages and cultures by associating English with legitimacy and success (Tavares, 2024). It also resonates with Dovchin's perspective that translingual experience involves precariousness and vulnerability (Dovchin, 2025).

Research Question Three explores how the characters manage identity through English, Farsi, silence, hesitation, and performance. According to the findings, identity in the play is not static or monolithic but dynamic, revisable, and testable. Marjan's "English Only" policy turns the class into a forum where students have to adopt and perform new identities through language. In this sense, it can be said that the analysis supports Butler's theory about the performance-based nature of identities (Butler, 1988). At the same time, it confirms the claim put forward by Bucholtz and Hall that identity is constructed in interactions, positioning, and recognition (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Identity, in this case, is partially performed and constructed through English as a way of listening to oneself through others' hearing. Correction, embarrassment, comparison, refusal, and moments of recognition form identities of the characters.

Finally, Research Question Four addresses the symbolic function of the classroom created by cultural pressure, aspiration, and transformation of the self. Analysis has revealed that the class room is not merely a place for learning but the key site of symbolization in the play. It disciplines through prioritizing English over Farsi while also allowing for

experimentation with new identities. As a result, the class room becomes a translingual space where both Iranian and Western identities coexist. Moreover, as shown in the literature review, in the contemporary scholarly discussion, language has become a tool of constructing memories, exercising agency, dealing with social pressures, and reconstructing identity. Thus, Maher (2024), for example, views language in the context of migration as a means of carrying memories of loss and nostalgia. Similarly, Kalan (2024) sees it as a struggle to maintain voice when speaking a language of others. With regard to Toossi's class room, this theoretical background helps to account for its emotional intensity, as it represents the characters' rehearsals of future lives, as well as potential losses associated with it.

The fifth research question looks into the ways in which the theories of translingualism and identity contribute to understanding the ideas of belonging, loss, and agency in the play. According to the concept of translingualism, both English and Farsi are not neutral languages but an evolving field of meaning, including emotional, cultural, and social aspects. The notion of the complex repertoire that is employed by multilingual speakers is crucial in the context of this work because, instead of simple transitions from one language to another, the characters move from one form of identity and belonging to another (Li Wei, 2018). On the other hand, identity theory helps to understand why those linguistic shifts correspond to shifts in identity: the English speakers' identities are defined by aspiration and recognition while Farsi speakers' identities stay loyal to intimacy, memory, and culture.

The next issue discussed in the paper is the issue of agency. Agency is not identified with the ability to speak fluent English; it is not also equivalent to the lack of linguistic pressure. However, it appears in small acts of choosing, resisting, and creating oneself. Goli considers English flexible enough; Roya uses English for establishing connections within her family; Omid claims his freedom to dream; Elham refuses to become oppressed by linguistic pressure. In fact, it reflects Mazzaferro's idea that displaced or migrant individuals develop their agency within even a structurally unequal linguistic framework (Mazzaferro, 2025). Also, it resembles Hugueny-Léger's opinion on the role of translingual creative expression in the destabilization of linguistic boundaries (Hugueny-Léger, 2024).



7. Conclusion

Sanaz Toossi's *English* can be examined from the standpoint of translingualism and identity theory as a piece of literature that dramatizes the dynamics among language, displacement, and culture. In this regard, it turns out that the play cannot be viewed only through the prism of learning English as a language and passing TOEFL. Rather, English should be perceived as a dynamic space in which characters construct their identities, negotiate their desires, fears of loss, and hopes for the future.

The research shows that the play makes use of several functions of language. English works here as performance, anxiety, identity construction, and agency. The "English Only" class makes characters perform new identities. Hesitations, silences, accents, and mistakes reflect anxiety experienced in the act of becoming visible in another language. English offers mobility, education, possibility to reconnect with families, and opportunities in the future, but, at the same time, it causes alienation, shame, and cultural uncertainty. In other words, Toossi demonstrates that English is a means of reaching imagined futures, yet it creates problems in maintaining relationships with Farsi and native identity.

Moreover, through the lens of translingualism, English can be interpreted as a drama of living between two languages. With regard to identity theory, it becomes clear that the identities of characters are never stable. Rather, they are constructed in interactions, corrections, performances, and recognition. Characters have different experiences with English; however, in each case, English is about dignity and identity. Thus, English plays an important role in cultural continuity.

In addition, it is essential to state that the main symbol of the play is the classroom. On the one hand, the space is full of discipline and pressure. On the other hand, it allows for hope and changes. In the English class, Toossi shows that agency is not always associated with speaking fluently or knowing something perfectly. Sometimes, it occurs through resistance, hesitation, humor, sincerity, or the wish to express oneself in one's own words. In this regard, English contributes to contemporary drama by providing a space for the exploration of identity.

Overall, the analysis demonstrates that English is much more than language acquisition represented on stage. English is a dramatization of



complex processes of displacement and cultural negotiations as well as an attempt to find identity in another language.

Future Recommendations

Future research might include the study of how English differs from other contemporary plays dealing with the issues of migration, multilingualism, and diaspora by showing how contemporary literature represents language as the space for cultural struggle and renewal. Other areas worth investigating include the role of gender in the use of language in English. Here the focus will be on how the four major female characters, Elham, Roya, Goli, and Marjan, relate to the use of the English language as an instrument of ambition, duty, shame, memory, and expression. Another possible line of investigation is the performance aspect of English, taking into account how accent, silence, pauses, and body language affect how the play is received when staged.

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