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## RESEARCH PAPER

### Exploring the Relationship between Language Learning and Identity Reconstruction at the University of Lahore, Pakistan

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how the language learners of The University of Lahore (UOL) perceived the connection between English language learning and reconstructing their identities. Twelve undergraduate English as a foreign language (EFL) students were the participants of focus groups that were conducted in order to collect data. Norton's poststructuralist and Social Identity theory was used as a theoretical framework to explain the impact of foreign language learning on students' identities on the basis of social factors that affect a person's identity after learning a language through this qualitative research. The overwhelming majority of students believed that their perception of their identity was significantly influenced by studying English. The vast majority of those who participated in the interviews indicated a high level of gratitude for this particular influence, appreciating its enormous worth and support throughout their language-learning journeys. Those interviewed had also shown a strong drive to assimilate and a desire to conform to the target language and its associated cultural norms. The results emphasize the significance of motivation and the crucial role that English as a world language plays in influencing how one perceives, redefines, and reconstructs their identity.

**KEYWORDS** EFL Learners, Identity Reconstruction, International Language, Key Role of English, Learner Identity

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## Introduction

Learning a new language is a thorough process that has an impact on a person's physical, mental, and emotional well-being. When it comes to how they "identify," language learners fluctuate between recognizing themselves as first-language speakers (L1) and realizing that they are second-language learners (L2). As a result, it is thought that the process of constructing one's identity through language use is ongoing, continuous, and dynamic (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2007). Identity develops through participation and active engagement in communities of practice, which necessitates the creation of connections between people, things, and the larger context (Wenger, 1998). Given how adaptive communities are, identity is seen as fluid, diversified, incorporating different perspectives, fragmented, and frequently containing inherent contradictions. Identity is intimately linked to the idea of community (Teng, 2018). Furthermore, it is believed that language is crucial for human identity formation, self-development, and cognitive function (Edwards, 2009). According to Norton (1997), one's identity both shapes and is shaped by their language. Research on the relationship between identity construction and second language acquisition is crucial. The learners use language as a tool to shape their dialogues,

but they also negotiate their sense of self and how they see their relationships with others (Norton, 2000).

Both resemblance and difference form the foundation of identity. People tend to identify with that which they find similar to themselves; on the other hand, they frequently dissociate from and feel uneasy about what they perceive to be strange or contradicting. According to Edwards (2009), the theory behind identity is similarity because the term "identity" (*identitas*), which means "same," has a Latin root that means "same." Prior to twenty years, Norton (1997), a pioneer in the field of identity research, strongly supported the contentious debate over the connection between language acquisition and identity, seeing it as closely related to theorizing in the field of language education at the time. In this sense, According to Norton, every time a language learner talks, they are actively taking part in an ongoing process of identity construction.

The growth of numerous identity conceptualizations has been developed by identity theory. Several types and forms of identity have been recognized in the literature to date, including social identity, sociocultural identity, cultural identity, ethnic identity, and more (Norton, 1997). Within this field of study, researchers have tackled the topic of identity from a variety of angles and theoretical viewpoint. According to Norton (2013, 2014), another approach to identity is poststructuralist theory that is used as a framework of this research. This theory tries to explain identity in terms of human subjectivity, otherwise known as "our sense of ourselves." Power is used to explain subjectivity because people are either subjects of power or subjects of power. Other theory which is used in this study is sociocultural theory of language learning. Researchers studying identity and language development are becoming more and more interested in poststructuralist theories of language (Norton & Morgan in press). The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's (1966) contributions to structuralism theories of language are frequently credited with putting a strong emphasis on the assessment of linguistic knowledge (competence). These ideas tried to explain how skilled listeners and speakers were able to recognize and use the predictable patterns and structures built into language.

The present study aims to show how English language learners of The University of Lahore perceive, reconstruct, and redefine their identities owing to learning English based on qualitative data, collected through focus group interviews with twelve undergraduate learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). Identity and investment in EFL learning have drawn a lot of attention over the past ten years due to the variety of perspectives that EFL learners take in various social situations.

## **Literature Review**

Identity, according to Norton, is how individuals view their place in the the universe, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how they view their chances for the future (Norton, 1997). Helen's remark amply demonstrates how listeners occasionally link a given dialect with a related set of social traits. Language can be used to oppose other people's imposed identities in situations when speakers have access to more than one language or dialect. Language and identity were correlated in Labov's study from 1966 and its replications (such as Trudgill, 1974). According to Mendoza Denton (2002) in the early stages of the study, sociolinguistic researchers assigned identities to people based on their affiliation with social groups. The researchers' own selection of social categories including socioeconomic class, age, gender, and ethnicity were seen as broad, predetermined aspects of identity. Even some researchers believe that identity and language learning are interdependent (Edwards, 2009; Norton, 1997).

According to Norton (2011), the growing interest in identity over the past several years is due to a shift away from the psycholinguistic components of language learning and towards a focus on the sociological and anthropological aspects of language acquisition. Norton (2011) discussed that since the 1970s, a large corpus of literature on identity and education has been published and documented how this field of study has evolved in light of ideas like investment, imagined communities, and resistance. A study on the cultural identities of the Miao, an ethnic minority in China, was undertaken by Trueba and Zou (1994). When the Miao pupils were placed in a unique educational environment, their strong ethnic identities gave them the drive they needed to succeed academically. This discovery was made during a study on Miao undergraduate students and their experiences at a university where the Han Chinese ethnic group constituted the majority of the student body. Learning a new language and culture in no way diminished their sense of self-identity or their commitment to their ethnic group; on the contrary, it strengthened it.

The study found that Miao people did not feel lesser in terms of material things despite coming from underprivileged families and living in rural parts of China. Instead, they discovered that their social identity provided them with important emotional support. They were driven to achieve because they wanted to join the educated elite and become university graduates in order to pay tribute to the sacrifices made by their family and other villagers. This study has significant ramifications since it shows that maintaining one's identity while learning in a new setting is not necessary. In fact, their commitment to maintaining Miao traditions, culture, and language and their Miao identity were strongly related to their ability to thrive in a new environment. According to Devos, throughout the early stages of socialization, people may build coping or defensive mechanisms to deal with challenging situations. According to Devos, the "selective permeability" technique postulates that when people are exposed to formal education, they do not all interpret the classroom setting similarly. It has been found that not every person internalizes instructional material at the same time. Depending on how much the internalization of knowledge threatens their social identity, their openness to school experiences differs (Devos, 1992).

The creation of a learner's identity in EFL instruction may be influenced by the EFL learning community. People who have a negative view of themselves in connection to studying English as a foreign language (EFL) typically show less drive and commitment to their language learning goals. On the other hand, those who work on their self-esteem are more likely to put more effort into their language learning. Murray and Kojima (2007) looked at a Japanese adult female student's non-classroom language learning journey and studied how her experiences influenced the formation of her identity in relation to her level of dedication. According to the study, the learner's happy and meaningful experiences helped shape who she is now. These findings highlight the mutually reinforcing nature of identity and language learning investment.

## **Material and Methods**

This study adopts a qualitative method, in order to investigate how university students reconstruct their identities and analyses their experiences studying English as a foreign language during their academic journey. Qualitative approach helps to understand the deep nature of the study problem that is impossible to measure in numbers in the research (Wallen & Hyun, 2012). This study explained the relationship between identity reconstruction and language learning in The University of Lahore, Pakistan. The critical analysis of the study following Norton's poststructuralist and Social Identity Theory as a theoretical frame work and model to explain the impact of foreign language learning on

students' identities on the basis of social factors that affect a person's identity after learning a language.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is based on qualitative approach. The study explained the relationship between identity reconstruction and language learning of EFL learners in The University of Lahore. The theoretical framework that was followed for the research was Norton's poststructuralist and Social Identity Theory to describe how students' identities are affected by learning a foreign language on the basis of social factors that affect a person's identity after learning a language.

### **Participants**

The data for the analysis was collected from the EFL learners of The University of Lahore. Twelve undergraduate students who were studying English as a foreign language (EFL) participated in the study. These participants were all enrolled in the same private institution of Lahore, Pakistan. The participants were six male and six female. They ranged in age from 18 to 23 and had been studying English for 3 to 7 years. The participants were of Punjab, KPK, and Baluchistan, Afghanistan and they were native speakers of Punjabi, Balochi, and Persian, respectively. In this study, convenience sampling is used to collect data. A sampling technique that included people whose length of time studying English spanned from one to six years. It is a type of non-probability sampling that includes sample being taken from a group of people that is convenient to handle (Mackey & Gass, 2005).

### **Data Collection**

Focus group were interviewed to elicit data for research. Eight questions were asked during the interview for this study, covering a range of identity-related topics. The definition of identity, its significance, the influence of learning a foreign language on one's identity, and the opinions of the participants on reconstructing identity as language learners were some of the issues covered in this study. The focus-group interviews were performed in the participants' first languages to ensure clarity and comprehension and to give them the opportunity to go into further detail about these concerns where appropriate.

### **Data Analysis**

This research is qualitative in nature. The data for the study were collected from interviews with focus group. These interviews were taped so that the data could be analyzed afterwards. The obtained data was analyzed in order to identify recurrent themes and the emerging categories obtained from the transcripts of the interviews. As indicated earlier, the interviews for the study were conducted in the native language of the participants and the transcripts of the interviews that are presented in the present research are translations into English.

### **Results and Discussions**

The objectives of the present research were: to investigate the way EFL learners of UOL identify and understand identity, and to check the understanding of the participants how learning English can affect their identity.

## **Identity: Definitions**

The question which was firstly covered in the interviews was how the participants defined their identities. All that was asked of the participants was their understanding of what constitutes identity and how they define "identity". (Question no1). The following are a few definitions:

The identity of a person reveals their sex, language, and race.

In my opinion, identity includes one's personality type as well as their culture and language, etc. It is a component of both their personality and abilities.

Everybody's identification reveals their existence. His or her race will also be a factor.

Your nationality and culture make up your identity.

What we do show our identity.

Our behaviors and actions define who we are. Our ideals and norms are what it is.

The participants' definitions of identity were analyzed, and according to the findings, the following themes stand out as identity's components and elements:

- **Culture:** cultural values, norms and standards.
- **Personality:** values; manners; beliefs; and worldviews.
- **Geographical boundaries:** It includes one's place of birth, residence, and employment.
- **Religion:** It refers to one's religious principles, practices, rituals, and acts.
- **Family and relationships:** communication, relations with people and connections with others.
- **Nationality:** rites, customs and ceremonies.
- **Sex:** It refers to one's sexual proclivities.
- **Behavior:** one's acts, behavioral patterns, and behavioral manifestations.
- **Existence:** one's mere presence in the world.
- **Physical body:** one's physical features and traits.
- **Ethnicity and ancestry:** It refer to one's ancestry and ancestral customs
- **Civilization:** historical context.

The above-mentioned indicators of identity are very varied, personal, social, personal and biological characteristics. These definitions provide clarity on the respondents' beliefs that identity is established both socially and personally, which means that identity be described in words that are both societal and personal. This shows how the

respondents have gone on to define the concept of identity with quite distinct, and occasionally competing, ideas.

These definitions cover a wide range of topics and identified in the relevant research papers are accurate representations. Identity has been defined on both social and personal levels (Edwards, 2009). The personal level describes unique qualities, traits, and attributes. At the societal level, identity is maintained via history and custom (Roth, 2010).

### **Identity: Importance**

The second question focused on the significance of having and belonging to a specific identity, as well as the reason(s) for it or its lack of significance. The answers of this question indicate that 6 respondents (54%) thought it was very necessary to identify oneself with a unique identity, whereas 7 respondents (57%) did not think it was particularly significant. The following are a few of the quotes:

Each person has a unique identity that reflects their behavior and race. Foreigners frequently inquire about your identity.

Identity is crucial because every person behaves in accordance with who they are, and this conduct will vary depending on the individual.

Having a unique identity demonstrates the worth of our country and how much we value it.

Yes, it's crucial to have a separate identity because different identities make people unique. If everyone has the same identity, discussing identity is meaningless.

As can be observed from the earlier quotes, the participants did not only define identity in terms of the elements indicated in Section 1 (e.g., nationality, race, ethnicity, behavior, etc.), but they also conceptualized identity as including these elements.

### **Reconstruction of Identity through English**

The respondents were questioned about their opinions on learning English and being exposed to this language has impacted their identity. They were also asked to indicate whether they thought this influence was positive or negative (Question #3, 4). According to the findings, six out of the 12 participants said that learning English had changed how they perceived their identities. Four of the participants thought this influence would be positive, two thought it would be bad, and two thought it would be both positive and negative. The following statements were made in answer to the question on how learning English can affect one's identity:

The benefit of learning English was that it made it possible for me to become more used to other cultures.

As English is an international language and I will use it frequently in the future, learning it helped me develop a good attitude towards it.

When we learn English, we can gain a lot of knowledge about English culture, if we adopt an English identity.

By learning the language, we can understand English speakers and their culture better.

I haven't changed all that much, but now I can learn helpful knowledge about other people and modify some of my own culture's "bad" practices by utilizing English.

I've been starting to think that I'm developing a new identity and can fulfill my desires right away.

My perspective has changed since, when I first started learning English, I was eager to learn about the culture of others. Now, though, I believe it's okay if other cultures influence me and become a part of my personal identity.

The Social Identity Theory of Norton (1997, 2011) is relevant in this case. According to Norton's (1997) "the relationship between the individual and the larger social world, as mediated through institutions such as families, schools, workplaces, social services, and law courts," is social identity. Norton's theory investigates and criticizes the idea of power, to demonstrate how language learners can challenge established power structures and offer a number of learning opportunities.

### **Feelings toward the Reconstruction Identity**

The following questions of interview (Question #5) focused on the participants' attitudes towards the impact, if any, that English had on how they perceived their identities. The findings revealed that 10 participants (90%) thought they were happy with the effect that English-language learning had or would have on their perception of who they were.

I've been greatly inspired by learning English. As a result, I now only use English on my phone and other electronic gadgets, watch English movies and television shows, and others.

Since English is a language which is used globally, it is beneficial that learning it makes us more like English people in terms of identity.

My identity is slightly altered by learning English. However, everything is dependent on you. You might want to study English's "bad things." Or perhaps you would prefer to discover its "benefits."

I feel good because I believe that since I began learning English, positive improvements have occurred.

These quotations also show that the majority of the interviewees believed that learning English had a positive effect on the way they recreated their identities in the L2.

### **Identity Reconstruction: Disadvantages**

The following interview question developed on the previous one and asked whether English had a positive or bad impact on language learners, regardless of whether or not it has impacted participants' perceptions of their own identities (Question #6). According to the findings for this question, 8 people thought this impact was beneficial, 2 participants thought it was negative, and 2 participants had mixed feelings.

English is recognized as an international language, thus this influence is positive.

An individual's learning a language changes the way they perceive their surroundings since language is like a key that opens up opportunities for knowing other cultures.

There are positive and negative effects of English on our identity. It varies. If we consider cultural aggressiveness, it is terrible; but, if we think about the positive characteristics of their culture, it is beneficial.

### **Peers' and Parents' Views**

Identity is "who we are for ourselves and who we are in relation to others," according to Roth (2010), who defines identity at the interpersonal level. The consideration of other people's contributions, such as learners' parents and classmates, this procedure seems legitimate because language learning and reconstruction of identity are societal efforts.

The participants were therefore asked to express their opinions regarding what their peers and parents thought about identity reconstruction in the second language (Question #7). According to the results, 6 participants believed that their parents and friends would support their efforts to reconstruct their identities, while 4 participants believed opposite. Two participants said that depending on the situation, their parents' and peers' opinions might change and be contradictory or mixed.

When parents of language learners will observe their children can interact in a language other than their own, it will help in the development of the children. Parents see this effect as a benefit for this reason.

My parents see the benefits of English because they think that if I fully master it, I will gain an excellent position in the future.

My parents believe that the culture of the speakers may be found in any language. They simply dislike this.

### **Influential Factors**

In Question #8, the respondents were also asked about the aspects of their identity that changed as a result of their decision to learn English. Two main reasons emerged from the participants' responses: a) media and the press (including the web, films, books, games, etc.) and b) the culture of English-speaking countries (such as interacting with English-speaking NSs while visiting such countries). This section elicited the following points:

The most effective channel for communication is the media. They transmit large volumes of sound, images, and movies very quickly.

There are numerous words in films and videos that I do not understand. This makes me want to look those words up in a dictionary, which helps me understand more about the English language.

The Internet is so beneficial to so many people as it makes it simple for them to propagate their own identities and have an impact on others' identities.



## **Conclusion**

This study was conducted to explain the impact of foreign language learning on identity reconstruction of EFL learners of The University of Lahore, Pakistan. Present study focuses much on various social factors that may affect language learners' identities. The study also highlights the facts of how particular relationships of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation, culture and ethnicity may affect the process of language acquisition of learners. Norton's poststructuralist and Social Identity theory were used as a theoretical framework to carry out the research. According to the findings of the study participants' strong desire to identify with and thus assimilate into the English culture can be interpreted as a sign that they see English as a means of identifying themselves. Some scholars believe that the reason EFL learners are so open to a new identity is because they began learning English at a young age, before their cultural identity was fully formed. The findings reveal that foreign language learning has a strong impact on identity of UOL students. Identity formation for language learners occurs both socially and personally. Students position themselves in relation to the current circumstance and actively participate in how they see themselves and those around them. No matter the circumstance, identity work takes place while learning a language. Learning a foreign language allows students to experience a new sense of self and how to interact with the outside world. Language learners can direct their own linguistic growth, assess their communicative proficiency, and (re)define their identity within the environment through informal interactions with other learners, whether they are experts or newcomers. This work focused on identity reconstruction of EFL learners. The results support the importance of discursive practices, power dynamics, solidarity, and theorization in relation to identity reconstruction during second language (L2) learning.

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