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Identity (Re) construction of International Students When Learning English

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Abstract

This qualitative study aims to investigate how English language acquisition and identity building relate from the viewpoint of English language learners. Data for this study was gathered via interviews with international students majoring in English education using narrative studies. Participant's use of concepts as varied as personal and social traits, ethnic origin, geographic location, religious affiliation, national customs and rituals, and national values, among others, to define the notion of identity was observed. The respondent also thinks that his experience of displacement has a significant impact on how his identity is rebuilt. From the interview, the subjects interviewed considered the impacts above to have positive and negative impacts on international students.

Keywords: International Student, Identity Reconstruction, Learner Identity, Learning English

Introduction

Identity formation or reorganization is two interpretations of identity reconstruction. Reconstructing one's identity involves relocating one's body and identity. This auto ethnography examines the intersection and negotiation of several types of identity, including personal, social, and cultural identity, as a result of reflection on the nature of the study abroad experience. Identity creation starts when someone relocates, and language use is the most fundamental factor that can influence identity reconstruction.

Van Lier (cited in Deters, 2011) asserts that the study of identity and how it relates to language and agency is still in its infancy. A person's physical, cognitive, and emotional well-being are all affected by learning a new language, making it a whole experience. When it comes to how they "identify," language learners oscillate between perceiving themselves as first-language speakers (L1) and realizing that they are second-language learners (L2). The process of developing one's identity through language usage is therefore seen to be ongoing, continuous, and dynamic (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2007). English, an international language, is currently the most studied language worldwide. Globally, 1.27 billion people speak English as of 2020. It surpasses Hindi (637 billion speakers) and Mandarin (1.12 billion speakers) to become the most widely spoken language. English is recognized as an official language in more than 50 nations. Since the grammar in English differs significantly from that of our native languages, we must adapt our usage of the language as we learn it.

We can take this real phenomenon of identity reconstruction and language learning from international students studying in Indonesia. According to QS World University Rankings, more than 6,000 students were enrolled in Indonesian universities last year, and approximately 10,000 foreign students arrived in Indonesia in 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic first appeared. International students are immigrant students in a country. One of the provisions they need to prepare is language, one of the languages they use a lot is English. Apart from that, as international students, they need to make adjustments in that country, not only need to adjust teaching methods in that country, but then from the reconstruction of identity, of course, this will happen to international students.

Language is a way of communication, according to Anderson (in Tarigan, 2015:21). Language, whether it is one's own tongue or a foreign language, is always employed in daily life. A person's entire being is involved when learning a new language, including their physical, cognitive, and emotional selves. During this process, language learners' perspectives of how they 'identify' themselves as speakers of their first language (L1) and students of a second language (L2) change. Because of this, it is believed that the process of developing one's identity through language usage is continual and dynamic (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2007). According to Edwards (2009), language is essential for human cognition, self-development, and identity creation. Language both shapes and is shaped by one's identity, according to Norton (1997). The processes of learning a second language and forming a new identity are also known to be interwoven (Edwards, 2009; Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Norton, 1995, 1997, 2009). When learning a foreign language, we must start at the very beginning and work our way up since language Foreigners pronounce our language differently than we do. We must study tenses, vowels and consonants, and a great deal more because English is renowned to be the simplest language to learn. Learning should advance a person's understanding of which they are, their culture, and the culture of their mother tongue. The identity reconstruction process that occurs to international students who choose to learn a language will be quite challenging because many things need to be adjusted, such as the language of instruction used by the destination country, and at the same time they need to adapt to living in a new place.

The process of identity reconstruction is a long process that must be experienced by international students. An international student has to establish himself when he wants to study abroad. Because many things have to be adjusted, and many expectations do not match reality. Learners must focus on receiving learning regardless of the various processes they experience. Likewise, what international students experience, there are many problems they have to face, some common challenges that international students may face; starting from living away from their parents, becoming independent, and adjusting to a new environment. And at the same time, they also have to focus on learning which their main goal for entering a new environment is. Not to mention they have to learn the language of instruction in the country. Because of this, it is normal for many overseas students to feel alienated, which can be caused by a lack of social skills and contribute to their lack of attention to their lectures. Additionally, it is common for international students to associate with peers from similar cultural backgrounds and view the outside world as unsupportive or even harmful to their cultural values and way of life as a result of their lack of ties to the local community. This usually occurs naturally. Alienation of international students should be a worry as cultural immersion is one of the reasons people choose to study abroad. In contrast, their lack of participation in the larger community prevents them from being included in the overall definition of an off-campus community. Due to this separation between "local" an

d "international," as well as a lack of cross-cultural engagement, which would benefit both foreign students and the host population, is present (Ahamad & Szpara, 2003; Callaway, 2010; Ee, 2013; Hodge, 2002; Sabry & Bruna, 2007).

In summary, previous studies have shown that international students experience many difficulties from both internal and external factors. Studying abroad is a good way to develop yourself besides that it can add insight to students who graduate. These studies have shown that exposure can be used to assist second language learning. In addition, various studies show that learning a language in a country creates new challenges, as well as creates new experiences for students. As a result, this study will analyse the aspects that lead to the reconstruction of the identity of international students learning English.

Identity and Environment

Every group or person possesses a quality that cannot be isolated from efforts to be recognized by others; this recognition can take many different forms and is what is referred to as the group identity or the individual identity. The component of a person's self-concept that derives from their perception of their social group membership as well as the value and emotional importance of such engagement is consequently their sense of identity. Both essentialist and non-essentialist, or constructivist, viewpoints can be used to determine identity. The essentialist perspective, as stated on page 253 of Virkkula and Nikula (2010), views identity as "something connected with one's self and considers it singular and somewhat stable." More recent research has concentrated on a non-essentialist viewpoint, even while identity is understood to have traits that are dynamic, flexible, and impacted by a number of experiences rather than being permanent and unchanging (Barkhuizen, 2016; Henry, 2020; Henry & Thorsen, 2018; Norton, 2013). According to Norton (2013), the concept of identity is viewed as interdisciplinary and encompasses a variety of academic fields, including sociology, anthropology, language learning and teaching, and cultural studies. According to a constructivist viewpoint, identity shouldn't be viewed in terms of binary oppositions like motivated or unmotivated. As learners position themselves via the opportunities they find to use their language skills, it should be seen as a social construct rather than a preconceived concept (Norton & Morgan, 2020). To put it more explicitly, the learner needs access to certain language practices and resources that are integrated within a social context in order to form this social identity (Darvon, 2018). For instance, English language students studying abroad in a country where English is the official language may have access to symbolic and material resources that they would not have at home. The environment is one of the variables that have the most impact on this identity; however other aspects also have an impact. Our environment has an ongoing impact on how we think, act, and interact with the outside world. For instance, when someone relocates to a place where there are social norms, religious observances, and a distinct style of doing business. Therefore, we as newcomers must adjust to the new environment, this adjustment affects our identity.

Identity and Language Learning

Identity and language are intricately linked. This is so because language is a tool that humans employ for spoken and written communication in everyday life. Language is a crucial aspect of cultural identity. In this way, we pass on our genuine identities from generation to generation. We share and convey our culture and its values via language. Language and words have the capacity to define and mold the human experience. Because of language, we can describe our experiences. When someone learns the language, a new identity is created for them. Language acquisition is a difficult process. Identity reveals the person and the factors that shape that person (Rovira, 2008). Language impacts how we

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connect with others and shows many facets of an individual's personality. No of the mother tongue, social and ethnic identity plays a big part in how language affects how we perceive the world. As a result, language has a significant role in determining one's identity as well as their skills and life experiences.

Method

This type of qualitative research places a strong emphasis on the individual experiences and viewpoints of the participants (Creswell, 2003). The narrative research approach was used for this investigation. By using this technique, researchers may understand how a person's identity is created by learning about their life experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Kramp, 2004). The set of participants in this study consisted of one international student. The study technique used to learn about students' impressions of their language acquisition was a questionnaire.

This research also focuses on the student's experience learning English while studying abroad, which is related to the student's drive and capacity for adjusting to a new environment.

Result

The interview results showed that the subject began to experience identity reconstruction after moving to Indonesia, namely at the age of 19 in 2018. The process of reconstructing the subject's identity started from the differences in language used in everyday life, the subject came from the Philippines.

"Struggling to learn the Indonesian language and problematic situations when talking to Indonesian people who don't know English."

"Culture differences make a lot of changes to my life. (Traditions, beliefs, and people)"

When she first set foot in Indonesia, the first thing that the subject realised about herself was the difficulty in interacting, the subject was quite proficient in English as a second language, so the subject tried to use English as his everyday language. However, it turns out that this makes the subject difficult because the majority of the people there are not fluent in English. In addition, the subject experienced culture shock, due to differences in traditions and beliefs of the local community, which is also a factor in the occurrence of identity reconstruction in the subject.

"I have expectations about the differences between Indonesia and my country, the Philippines. (Cost of living, the place I am going to stay in, people, food, and tourist attractions)"

"I am aware that education in Indonesia could be different from what we have in my country, but I didn't expect that it would affect me as a whole being, especially with the language used when teaching and learning."

"Honestly, no. Before coming here, I tried anticipating the life I would experience. But, when I came here, everything felt unreal. I came here to finish my goal, as an Architect graduate, but now, I will go back as a Teacher (soon)."

This condition shows that the subject has expectations about life in Indonesia when he decides to continue his education in Indonesia. Such expectations are certain about the differences between Indonesia and the Philippines, both in terms of the cost of living, the place where the subject will live while continuing their education, the local community, and local food originating from Indonesia. In contrast to the subject's expectations about the world of education in Indonesia, the subject tries to anticipate everything about education by preparing himself and equipping him by learning English, however, it still turns out to be not following what is on the ground. The subject has a dream of becoming an architect, but

it turns out that going to college in this department cannot be said to be easy, because not many people there speak English, even the introductory lecturer's use Indonesian in explaining lessons. This must have greatly affected the focus of learning the subject, so the subject decided to move to major in English education.

"Yes, it does affect me because this isn't the life I dreamed about. I thought I would feel the things I used to watch on television, and social media that live in a different country makes it more sensible. To experience something unique and something we don't have in my country, but no. Although it doesn't matter now, it still affects my whole being."

From the narration of the subject above, it can be seen that this greatly influences the identity of the reconstruction subject. Because this is not a study abroad envisioned by the subject, who, as can be seen on TV or social media, that living in a different country can feel something that has never been felt in their home country it is not, coupled with the transfer of subject majors.

"Other than adapting to the type of teaching method used in class (Mixture of Indonesian-English Language), no more. The solution I did was a lot of interaction and gives & takes learnings with my friends on campus. I used to speak with them and try to comprehend what they were saying. If I don't know words, I ask them for the translation and then if they don't understand my English, I would explain it to them. So I learned because I interact and adapt." "Yes I do, besides language, it's hard to commute because people here always use a motorcycle, and then interact with Muslims because I am a non-Muslim, I don't know if I am doing the right thing so I don't make them feel disrespected. Also the food, we got the same ingredients but different types of dishes. It's hard to eat and get used to the food here."

As previously mentioned, the main problem with the subject when moving countries is the language problem. Not infrequently even in the English language education department the issue still finds it difficult to understand the language by both the lecturer and other friends. To complete this subject slowly try to interact more often with others, if something is not understood from both sides the subject will ask more about the topic, so that this language problem is slowly resolved. However, besides the language, the issue has other experiences when trying to adapt to a new place, such as using transportation, where the subject does not have a vehicle, so this is quite difficult for the subject if they want to travel. Besides that, the majority of the population is Muslim, which is enough to make the issue adapt, not because of any incompatibility, but because of the fear of adapting when interacting. And of course, the problem of food is a problem that is quite often faced by international students, in adjusting tastes.

"I did, back when I was new here. And yes, it does affect me, especially my mental state and social aloofness. I can only speak English before so when people cannot speak English, they tend to neglect and just ignore talking to me. Also, I feel like some think that I am boasting about my ability to speak English, so I rarely speak and just talk when I am asked. But right now, I can understand Bahasa Indonesia better and have a lot of friends to speak with. I don't feel like being an outsider anymore.

From the narrative above, the aspect that quite influences the subject's identity reconstruction is feeling like an "outsider". This is quite often felt by international students; the feeling of being ignored by other people greatly affects the mental state and tends to make the subject feel alone. Again, this problem is due to language, many fellow students

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think that someone who uses English is just to make fun; it is undeniable that this is due to the lack of people who can speak English and the local people's lack of exposure to it. With time, the subject can adjust and can understand Indonesian.

"Yes, I do. The way I speak, talk to older ones, the dress code, foods is eaten and higher respect for religious differences."

"If you were to ask me back before when I was in a different faculty, I would say I wasn't and only happy because I got to attend the course I dreamed of; but now, more likely to feel better than before. I can say I am happy but not 100% but I will miss Indonesia when I go back to the Philippines for good."

It has been almost 5 years since the subject has lived in Indonesia, during which the identity reconstruction process will continue to run, during which time the subject can adapt to the new environment. With this, the subject gets new experiences, such as how to talk to older people, how to dress according to where we are, and respecting other religions. And when asked whether he was happy with life in Indonesia, the subject said he couldn't say one hundred percent because, this whole was not what the subject had dreamed of, but now things are better than before and the subject is grateful for the life experience gained from this experience.

Discussion

The evidence shows that both internal and external variables can contribute to identity reconstruction. Identity reconstruction is the reformation of one's identity because reconstruction signifies reformulation. This is brought on by migrating to a new location, where we must adapt in order to continue living, and it is at this point that the process of reconstructing our identities starts. Additionally, language is another motivating issue in the subject's circumstance. The subject is required to study the Indonesian language of instruction in addition to English. As a result, the subject ran into numerous problems. According to a growing amount of research from various disciplines, identity (re)construction and language learning are closely related. As an example, have a look at Barnawi, 2009; Huang, 2011; Joseph, 2009; Lazzaro-Salazar, 2013; Nabavi, 2010; Norton, 1995, 1997, 2009, 2011; Norton & McKinney, 2011; and Roth, 2010 for a list of scholars who have extensively researched this subject. Even some academics (Day, 2002; Edwards, 2009; Norton, 1997) believe that identity and language acquisition are related. According to Norton (2011), there has been an upsurge in interest in identity over the past few years as a result of a move away from the psycholinguistic components of language learning and toward a focus on the social and anthropological dimensions of language acquisition. Identities and education writings written since the 1970s are reviewed. If the aforementioned are external reasons, then feeling like an "outsider" is an internal element that starts the identity-rebuilding process. This sense of being an "outsider" has a significant impact on how accepting learning is emphasized. When you have great expectations yet they don't match the current reality, other issues can also develop.

Identity Change of International Student

A change in identity refers to the role that a person realizes that his old behavior is very different from his new behavior; this can also be seen from the perspective of other people by being aware of other people's reactions to us. This is bound to happen to international students who experience a change of residence.

"I did, back when I was new here. And yes, it does affect me, especially my mental state and social aloofness. I can only speak English before so when people cannot speak English, they tend to neglect and just ignore talking to me. Also, I feel like some think that I am boasting about my ability to speak English, so I rarely speak and just talk when I am asked. But right now, I can understand Bahasa Indonesia better and have a lot of friends to speak with. I don't feel like being an outsider anymore."

All of us are affected by life's transitions, and each one is often followed by a period of adjustment (Miller, 2010). Even when transition is advantageous, it can still be detrimental to a person's mental health, especially given the challenges it entails, such as lifestyle changes and emotions of uncertainty (Haslam et al., 2008). Even though many transitions are the result of unplanned life events (such as injury or illness; Haslam et al., 2008), many transitions do occur on purpose, such as the transition from high school to university (Iyer, Jetten, Tsivrikos, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009), and can have positive outcomes (such as the acquisition of a skill or a qualification, for example).

A Reality that Influences Identity

A reality very rarely matches expectations. Even though we have worked hard to realize our expectations, there are some things that don't match. International students may experience culture shock, which can include feelings of homesickness, loneliness, and anxiety. This is also a reality that must be faced by international students. The subject of this study also faced the same thing, where she had set high expectations; she thought that studying abroad would be as beautiful as what she saw on social media and television. But in fact not, these things that don't match expectations are enough to influence her identity reconstruction.

Although international students make expectations about the practical situation in Indonesia, wrong judgments occur when their prior knowledge is insufficient. Keith (female, Philippines) has stated that his initial motivation for going to Indonesia was to continue his studies at the university level. After coming to Indonesia alone, he had anticipated that the education system in Indonesia and his foreign country would be different, but he never knew it would actually affect his life completely. He saw that the reality of the education system in Indonesia, which explains why this also, affects motivation in receiving appropriate learning as he stated through interviews that:

"I have expectations about the differences between Indonesia and my country, the Philippines. (Cost of living, the place I am going to stay in, people, food, and tourist attractions)"

"I am aware that education in Indonesia could be different from what we have in my country, but I didn't expect that it would affect me as a whole being, especially with the language used when teaching and learning."

Adapt and Identity Changes

Studying abroad may be an interesting and difficult experience for international students who must deal with a variety of adjustment challenges, notably those related to academic, social, and psychological adjustment (Ward & Kennedy 1993, 1999). Although they may experience feelings of invisibility in their classes, international students frequently struggle to fit into the culture of the host nation (San Diego 2017:50). Students must culturally adjust to both their new academic environments and their host nation. The degree of international students' adaptability is crucial to reducing their stress and facilitating easier adaption (Misra & Castillo 2004). According to Vershinina and Kocheva (2015), adjusting to a new environment for international students involves accepting cultural differences and lowering the psychological barrier that exists between their culture and that of the host nation. Additionally, students feel pressured to live independently, which isolates

them from domestic students and leaves them feeling lonely and homesick. Due to their lack of focus and low motivation in both their academic and social lives, international students frequently experience depression (Lin & Yi 1997).

Identity Reconstruction and Learning Language

Learning a language is the process of knowing and studying a new language. Language learning can be done in various ways, one of which is learning it in higher education. This is one of the right choices, where learning a language in lectures will be greatly helped by the environment that uses the language being studied. As Keith (female, Filipino) is currently doing, he is studying English in education. Currently Keith is studying abroad, namely Indonesia, which means he is required to learn the language of instruction used in Indonesia. This makes the challenges faced by the subject even greater. And this is also what makes the subject experience identity reconstruction right when moving places.

As an Outsider: the Attempts of Belongings

Studying abroad opens you up to new cultures and broadens your perspectives. However, sometimes, in the midst of assimilating and trying to fit in, you may struggle to feel like you belong. Some international students with language differences are enough to make Keith (female, Filipino) feel like an outsider according to the interview:

"I did, back when I was new here. And yes, it does affect me, especially my mental state and social aloofness. I can only speak English before so when people cannot speak English, they tend to neglect and just ignore talking to me. Also, I feel like some thinks that I am boasting my ability to speak English, so I rarely speak and just talk when I am asked. But right now, I can understand better Bahasa Indonesia and got a lot of friends to speak with, I don't feel being an outsider anymore."

This makes many international students themselves end up having their own group which is separate from local students, this makes international students rarely interact with local students, making it difficult for them to receive learning. Feeling like an educator makes students lose focus in learning; this can be quite a serious thing. Again, language problems are a challenge for international students. However, this can be overcome by learning the language of the country so that international students can mingle with others.

Conclusion

The explanation above makes it quite evident that identity may affect one's capacity to learn a language. Conversely, learning a language—whether it be a second language, a third language, etc.—can even assist a person in redefining who they are. This is so that students may acquire both the language and the culture that go along with it. This method starts the identity reconstruction process, which continues until the student completes their course of study.

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