

# **I'm No Longer a Child: A Closer Look at the Interaction Between Iranian EFL University Students' Identities and Their Academic Performance**

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## **Abstract**

Although university EFL students represent a wide array of social and cultural identities, their multiple and diverse identities are not usually considered in foreign language classrooms. This qualitative case study attempted to examine identity conflicts experienced by Iranian EFL learners at the university context. To this end, two Shiraz University students' identities were investigated. Semi-structured interviews were the instruments utilized to collect the necessary data. Findings indicated that despite the close relationship existing between language learning and learners' multiple identities, practitioners made little or no attempt to address their students' identities. This negligence of their identities, in turn, led to their reluctance to engage in classroom activities and their lack of interest in what they learn. Implications of these findings for foreign language teaching pedagogy are also provided.

**Keywords:** EFL learners, Engagement, Identity conflict, Language pedagogy, Multiple identities.

## **1. Introduction**

University EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students represent a wide array of social and cultural identities. They might be mothers, fathers, teachers, employees, workers, sisters, or brothers in addition to being university students. Despite their multiple and diverse identities, foreign language teaching pedagogy continues to consider them as just "language learners". The important point is that learning a foreign language is more than acquiring a set of syntactic, semantic, and phonological rules of the target language in a vacuum; it is, in fact, a "reconstruction of selves" within a broader national and cultural context (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000). If these identities are recognized and activated in learning, EFL students will be actively involved in the learning process (Tabaku, 2009). Although practitioners might intuitively be aware of these multidimensional and dynamic learner identities, in practice, they make little or no attempt to accommodate their students with the teaching methods applied and the instructional materials utilized in the classroom.

Even though learner identities have extensively been studied so far (e.g., Bashir-Ali, 2006; Norton, 1997; Shardakova & Pavlenko, 2004), a unanimous agreed-upon definition has not yet been suggested. Over the past few years, the meaning of the term “identities” has evolved from being considered as a “stable core self” (Hall, 1996) to contradictory, dynamic, and multiple dimensions of a person (Block, 2006, 2007; Pavlenko, 2002). Despite the different ways of viewing identity, recently, English learner identities have been addressed and studied from a poststructuralist point of view which conceptualizes identities as multiple, diverse, dynamic, and contradictory (Zacharias, 2010). Several researchers have investigated the multidimensional and non-unitary nature of learner identities (e.g., Armour, 2004; Boshier, 1997; Lam, 2000; Norton, 2000) even though some of them (e.g., Armour, 2004; McKay & Wong, 1996; Norton, 1995) believe that negotiating multiple identities is a site of struggle. Poststructuralist researchers claim that identity is a site of struggle such that subjectivity is produced in a variety of social sites, all of which are structured by relations of power in which the individual takes up different subject positions which may be in conflict with each other (Norton, 2000).

Pointing to the need for teachers to accommodate English learner dynamic identities in the classroom, Norton (1995) gave an example from “Mai”, one of the participants in her study. Mai was a Vietnamese young woman who took ESL courses at night to improve her spoken and written English. She had to make a great sacrifice to attend this course since she needed to manage her already hectic life of working and taking care of her family. Given the sacrifices she made to attend the course, she unwillingly had to drop it because she felt frustrated sitting for a whole lesson and just listening to one student talking about his country. Norton (1997) believed that Mai’s teacher might have incorporated the lived histories of the students in her teaching approaches; nevertheless, the present approach did not seem to accommodate Mai’s needs to learn English in the new country. According to Norton, the lack of involvement experienced by Mai might be because of the teacher’s failure to acknowledge her identity as an immigrant in the new country and thus, to consider her language needs.

In their study, McKay and Wong (1996) investigated the identities of their participant “Michael Lee”. In this study, Michael actively attempted to resist the way he was positioned as an ESL student. In his first English exam, he decided not to write on the topic of family or school suggested by his teacher. Instead, he wrote about sports and pets which were his own hobbies. Michael’s attempt to “write about his hobbies”, according to McKay and Wong, was indicative of delicate social negotiations to fashion desirable identities. In fact, he resisted to be a passive recipient of positioning and attempted to reposition himself by deploying discourses and counter discourses.

Fernsten's (2008) case study showed that an ESL student attempted to integrate the many philosophies and world views that composed her identity. For this particular student, negotiating the expression of her ideas in a manner that did not betray the way she thought about them, but that was also academically acceptable, was a site of continued struggle. According to Fernsten (2008), poststructuralists view language as the site of both social and political struggle; however, many students are not aware that it is possible to contest the voices of authority rather than to accept them as truth, and thus, to their perceptions of who they are in the academy. On the basis of the data she collected during this case study, Fernsten (2008) argued that ESL writing students may have student identities imposed on them through academic conventions which do not allow for their natural expression of ideas.

Reflecting on the above-mentioned stories, it can be found out that the issue of identity can have a direct influence on language learners' involvement in classroom activities. To further investigate this issue, the present study intends to examine identity conflicts experienced by Iranian EFL learners at the university context and the possible influences they might have on their engagement in classroom activities.

### **1.1. Objectives of the study and research questions**

Considering the fact that learners' identities may directly influence their involvement in classroom activities, the present qualitative case study is an attempt to examine identity conflicts Iranian EFL learners experience while learning English. To this aim, it intends to seek answers to the following research questions:

1. Do Iranian university EFL learners experience any identity conflicts in the classroom?
2. Do these identity conflicts have any effects on their engagement in classroom activities?

## **2. Method**

### **2.1. Participants**

Two Shiraz University students agreed to participate in this study voluntarily. They studied English Literature in the Department of Foreign Languages and linguistics. One of them was a female freshman and the other one was a male sophomore student. In this section, each of these participants' profile will be described in detail.

#### ***George***

George comes from a family of six. He is the fourth child of his family. He was born in Shiraz (one of the big and important cities of Iran where the study was

conducted) and was 25 years old at the outset of this research. He started studying English when he was in the third grade of guidance school. However, he was not able to finish his English studies since he had to do his military service; therefore, there was a two-year gap in his studies. But, after finishing the military service, he started studying English once more at the same institute and he was still a student of that institute at the time of this study.

### ***Beth***

Beth comes from a family of four. She was born in a small city of Fars Province (the same province where the research was done) and was 20 years old at the beginning of this project. To continue her studies, she had to live in dormitory while she was a Shiraz University student. Both of her parents hold high school diplomas while her mother is a housewife and her father is self-employed. She had attended a private institute in her hometown and received her senior degree from that institute. She studied the natural sciences at high school and took English-only entrance examination for entering university. In English-only entrance examination, university applicants are required to study general high school courses such as English, Persian Literature, Arabic Language, and theology. Hence, despite the name given to this test, the “English-only entrance examination” is not an “English-only” exam; it consists of different subjects one of which is English. However, the coefficient allocated to each of these subjects is different from each other. Additionally, these applicants are tested on a 100-item English test, called “specialized English test”. Such students are only allowed to choose majors related to English language such as English Literature, English Translation, Linguistics, and Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL).

## **2.2. Data collection and analysis procedures**

This study was a one-academic-year longitudinal case study starting from January, 2012 and continuing up to January, 2013. Ethnographic research can best be utilized to analyze people’s perspectives regarding how they perceive and make sense of the world. In particular, ethnographic interviews can provide the researcher with an insight into how identities are constructed, maintained and communicated with others (Marvasti, 2004). Therefore, in this study, to collect the necessary data, ethnographic interviews were conducted and recorded by the researcher for later analysis. Altogether, six individual interviews, each about thirty-minute duration, were conducted. The interviews, conducted every two months, were semi-structured with open questions and their main focus was on the participants’ previous histories, their English language learning experiences and the reasons for their reluctance to engage in classroom activities if there were any. The two participants agreed to be interviewed in English since they perceived themselves proficient enough to be able to express their ideas in English.

Data analysis was a gradual, recursive and ongoing process; that is, data collection and analysis were performed synchronically. This procedure enabled the researcher to constantly evaluate, reevaluate and reformulate the theoretical framework of the study, its coded categories, and its research questions. As soon as an interview was conducted, a preliminary analysis was performed leading to new questions which were then posed in subsequent interview sessions. As part of data analysis, the transcription of the interviews was a significant and complicated aspect of the study. In order to transcribe interviews, the researcher first listened carefully to one part of each interview and then transcribed it. While transcribing the interviews, pauses, fillers, and vocatives were not represented exactly because the focus of this study was on the texts themselves.

The data were analyzed by looking particularly at the participants' ways of constructing their identities and their perception of the teachers' views of their identities. The focus was on how these students made use of language to express their values, perceptions and interpretations of demanded tasks and activities at the university. Values are one of the important influences on the way in which people communicate. People's values significantly determine their behavior and the way they evaluate their own and other people's actions. In other words, values influence the communication of people's identity (Chen & Starosta, 1998). This gives an insight into how the participants view themselves and how they perceive others' view of them.

### **3. Results and Discussions**

Being older than his classmates, George constantly admitted his failure to adapt to the university context. He repeatedly expressed dissatisfaction with the practices applied at the university. As he mentioned in one of his interviews,

If I could change something, I would change the way professors treat students. They take the majority of students' proficiency level into consideration. However, I do not accept this. And I believe that the minority of better or talented students should be taken into account. If we want to consider the majority, the level of everything including teaching methods, all discussions, and transfer methods will lower. All of them will be degraded. But, if we consider the minority, the level of all these things will increase and the rest of students also have to cope with the situation. It must be difficult. It must be challenging. Basically, the whole university must be like this. There must be something we search for. If it is simple and simplistic, the result will be this general situation existing now.

In this extract, George demonstrates his resistance to the practices applied at the university by calling them low-level activities. In fact, he is struggling against

university professors' assumptions about the best and the most useful teaching methods applied in the classroom context. He thinks that his identity as a high-level English learner which he held before entering university has no longer been recognized. Hence, he resists the subject position of intermediate-level university student and voices his concern about this subject positioning by his teachers. However, he seems to be looking beyond these practices thinking about his whole future life plans. As he said in another interview,

I decide to continue studying in the future but I am too worried. I am worried about our job opportunities: 1000 tomans or 1200 tomans per each hour; this is really worrying. If I am paid 1500 tomans per hour, I should work five hours to be able to buy a kilo of rice. This is very worrying.

Outside of this university, George is a 25-year-old young man planning for his future life. What is expected of him at the university contradicts his image of himself. He has a long-term plan for his future but what he is asked to do at the university is "simple and simplistic". His family's financial status is not that satisfactory and he is ashamed of asking his parents for his personal expenses. Nevertheless, he is just viewed as a university student by his teachers. His identity is much more complex and complicated than what his teachers perceive. In fact, he desires to shape positions that accord his values and fulfill his purposes.

As another example of the informants' view toward teaching methods exercised at the university, Beth said,

We have simple prose which is very ridiculous. Its class is very bad. It is similar to reading comprehension. We do not learn any further information. Like little children, we read them and give definition for words and sentences. It is boring. It is repetitive.

Coming from another city and having to live in dormitory, Beth expects more than what she is offered at the university. She lives alone and far from her family and friends. These difficulties are not apparently taken into account by her teachers leading to her dissatisfaction with the teaching methods and textbooks taught at the university. Using adjectives such as "ridiculous", "boring", and "repetitive", she attempts to demonstrate her resistance to the teaching methods applied. By comparing herself and her classmates with "little children", she is, in fact, attempting to point to the emotional dissonance she feels between her real identity and what the teachers want them to do in the classroom. This indicates that she believes these tasks are childish leading to a kind of conflict between her current identity and the identities imposed on them by their teachers.

She also complains about her writing and listening classes in this way,

Our listening professor played "listening excerpts" which were very difficult. He himself knew that they were beyond our ability. I did not like our writing course either. I asked other students. They told me they did not like it either. It was not practical. We wrote something but the lessons, I think, were not applicable, they were simple and useless.

In the above extract, Beth talks about another vital problem observed at the university; that is, their lack of "ownership" over their listening and writing courses. In practice, her teachers typically maintain control over which excerpts should be played at the classroom and whose voice should be heard. Therefore, the classes belong more to the teachers than to the students. Hence, such a situation would bring about some kind of identity conflict for the students which leads to their dissatisfaction and as a result, of their reluctance to engage in the classroom activities. She wanted her teachers to allow them to be involved in choosing teaching materials drawing strength from her social identity as a grown-up adult.

In addition to the teaching methods applied at the university, the level of the textbooks taught was also considered worrying by the participants. Beth, for example, complained about the books taught to them,

Last year, I was not satisfied with the books taught here. Their level was much lower than ours and my level was lowered because of this. I felt I was stagnant and I did not use my brain. The reading book was rubbish. Its level was very low. In my opinion, it was nothing. We were taught words such as "participation". The books were not that interesting.

Just as George believed the level of everything including textbooks was low at the university, Beth also expressed her dissatisfaction with the textbooks taught to them. She struggles against this subject positioning by their teachers claiming that her proficiency level has decreased because of being taught low-level textbooks. She is trying to demonstrate her resistance by using negative words such as "rubbish" and "nothing". As argued by Pavlenko (2000), language learners may experience the everlasting tension between what they choose themselves to be and what others position them to be. The values and ideologies held by individual learners and communities contribute to negotiation and, even sometimes, conflict between their self-identification and the way they are positioned by other people.

On the basis of the findings of the present study, we fully agree with Ushioda (2009) who emphasized the point that we should not view our central research participants as *language learners* since being language learners is just one aspect of their identities. We should understand that these participants are *people* located in particular social, cultural, historical, and political contexts. Hall (1996)

also pointed out the important role teachers can play in learners' identity construction; they can either create or impose identities on learners.

In response to the two research questions posed at the outset of this research, results of the present study revealed Iranian university EFL learners experience identity conflicts in the classroom context and these conflicts lead to their reluctance to engage in the classroom activities. Hence, they may sometimes be perceived as passive language learners by their teachers. This lack of attention to their multiple and diverse identities may also result in their dissatisfaction with the practices applied at the university. These findings are consistent with what other researchers who examined the same issue found in their studies.

The present findings confirm Norton's results (1997) which indicated that the lack of involvement experienced by Mai might be because of the teacher's failure to acknowledge her identity as an immigrant in the new country and thus, to consider her language needs. The same findings are also in harmony with McKay and Wong's (1996) finding which pointed to Michael's resistance to be a passive recipient of positioning and his attempt to reposition himself by deploying discourses and counter discourses. Moreover, in line with Fernsten's (2008) results, the present findings confirmed the fact that student identities imposed on them through academic conventions do not allow for their natural expression of ideas.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This qualitative case study was an attempt to highlight the point that learning English is not just acquiring linguistic aspects of the language. It is a complex social practice which involves a transformation of learners' multiple identities. Despite the close relationship between language learning and learners' multiple identities, practitioners make little or no attempt to address learners' identities when learning English in the classroom context. Results of this study revealed that teachers and practitioners need to pay more attention to their learners' identities when designing courses, preparing materials and selecting teaching approaches. Although this is a very time-consuming and complicated task which necessitates lots of investigations and analyses, it is, undoubtedly, worth practicing. EFL teachers can try to reduce language learners' tension between what they choose themselves to be and what others position them to be (Pavlenko, 2000) by making themselves familiar with their students as far as possible.

The methodological implication of the findings of this study is that listening to the voices of language learners is an important step in understanding their participation in the discourse community as well as in their identity construction supporting the view that learners' voices should be recognized in SLA research (Benson 2004; Block, 1997). Moreover, it can be implied that students'



participations guarantee their positive attitudes towards learning and community leading to their willingness to engage in classroom activities. One possible suggestion for teachers can be employing diverse types of activities in the classroom and providing students with different opportunities for language learning in order to satisfy needs and wants of learners of diverse identities.

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