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THE CONSTRUCTION OF INDONESIAN EFL LEARNERS' IDENTITIES: A NARRATIVE-BASED CASE STUDY

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Abstract

The identity that the learners construct during the English learning process is essential to understand how the EFL learners continuously negotiate the identities they have until they successfully achieve adequate proficiency in English. This narrative-based case study investigates how the learning of English has constructed the learner identity of two Indonesian postgraduate students who graduated from the English Education Department. Categorized under narrative inquiry design, this research explored the participants' personal narratives related to their experiences during the English language learning process. In the early phase of identity construction, both participants showed little or no relevance in learning English because it was imposed on them through the school curriculum. However, soon they developed positive identities which later turned to be false positivity. Thus, these distressing moments asked for more investments from the participants. This study successfully confirms the notion of complex, multilayered, and multifaceted proved by the narratives that emerged from the participants' lived English learning experiences.

Keywords: identity construction, learner identity, narrative inquiry

Introduction

The process of identity construction is considered to be an important element in a successful learning process. In EFL and ESL learning context, the learners bring their unique linguistic and cultural backgrounds to the class (Choi, 2018). This phenomenon makes the learners go through multi-layered and continuous identity negotiation as they learn English as a language that also brings about the culture. Therefore, each learner will not have a single and uniform identity (Gee, 2008). Thus, the learning process the learners undergo will be different and unique for each individual.

In understanding learner identity in learning a language, past scholars often associated it with socio-educational motivation (Choi, 2018). However, the concept of motivation could not capture the whole phenomenon. Therefore, the term investment was introduced by Norton (2000) to explain it. This term does not change the term motivation in language learning but complements the traditional concept of motivation. Unlike the concept of motivation which sees language learners as unitary and ahistorical, the notion of investment explains how the

language learners select and invest some efforts in learning the language based on their needs, sociocultural histories and environment, and multiple identities (Choi, 2018). Besides that, the teacher's investment in teaching the target language is perceived to be equally important and must be addressed too because in the process both parties are involved and affect each other (Keiler, 2018; Lie, 2017; Prabandari, 2020; Teng, 2019; Ubaidillah & Widiati, 2021).

As implied before, the identities that the learners have will be constantly negotiated and changed over time. In line with the statement, Barnett and Antenucci (2006), Norton (2000), and Teng (2019) stated that identity is fluid as it will change depending on many factors revolved around it. This is what many scholars said to be the main characteristic of identity. Moreover, identity is also complex (Barnett & Antenucci, 2006; Norton, 2000), subjective (Ubaidillah et al., 2020), multiple and diverse (Choi, 2018; Norton, 2000; Teng, 2019), may be in tension or conflict (Barnett & Antenucci, 2006; Norton, 2000; Teng, 2019; Ubaidillah & Widiati, 2021), and affecting and affected by the environment (Al Mubarokah & Prasetya, 2020; Harjanto, Lie, & Wijaya, 2019; Mutiara, 2020; Sarie, Pratolo, & Purwanti, 2020; Ubaidillah & Widiati, 2021). Moreover, Bucholtz and Hall (2010) argued that identity will not exist prior to discursive exposure. It means that identity cannot self-emerge.

Barnett and Antenucci (2006) proposed an ESL learner identity framework which can also be applied in EFL context to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the concept. They stated that the ESL learner identity is constituted by social identities, disciplinary identities, and biographical identities. Each of them is further categorized into smaller identities. For social identity, they are comprised of cultural and intercultural identities. For disciplinary identities, they are composed of meaning-making identities, discourse identities, and active language learner identities. Lastly, biographical identities are formed by physical identities, family identities, community identities, language identities, and ESL learner identities. Each language learner brings these identities with them when learning English. Therefore, if one identity that constituted the learner identity is changed or negotiated, the whole identity will be affected (Norton, 2000; Norton & De Costa, 2018). Moreover, each of the identity mentioned is important in constructing the learner identity. That is why the concept of learner identity is complex, multilayered, and multifaceted (Barnett & Antenucci, 2006; Bucholtz & Hall, 2010; Norton, 2000; Richards, 2021).

With this unique and important topic, it is no wonder if the research on identity continues to capture the attention of the EFL and L2 scholars (Lei & Liu, 2019; Lie, 2017; Norton, 2000; Norton & De Costa, 2018). In the Indonesian EFL context, Lie (2017) and Ubaidillah and Widiati (2021) addressed the issues, opportunities, and challenges of cultural identity transformation in multicultural settings and its effect on the student's English performance. From the study, it could be seen that the learning of English made the learners have to go through continuous negotiation with their identity as they have a multicultural background. Thus the teacher's role is important to clarify their stance as English learners who should not lose their identity as Indonesian people and avoid confusion when the identities they have are contradictive. There is also more research on this topic in the Indonesian EFL context such as Gandana and Nissa (2021) and Mutiara (2020) who researched how an Indonesian writer continuously negotiate her cultural identity

amidst globalization and English learning, Ke Lomi & Mbato (2020) and Ubaidillah et al. (2020) who focused on the struggles of Indonesian EFL novice teachers in constructing their professional identities by utilizing their unique experiences as EFL learners, and Wirza (2018) and who discussed an in-depth explanation of the identity construction of two Indonesian EFL learners.

However, even if there is a growing interest to conduct research on this topic proved by many previous studies, more research is expected to keep on being conducted to deepen the understanding and explore the full extent of the practicality of this topic. Therefore, this study wants to fill the gap by investigating how the learning of English has constructed the EFL learner identity of two Indonesian postgraduate students.

By doing so, it is hoped that this study will enrich the body knowledge of the identity research field, encourage the English scholars especially Indonesian to do more studies on the same field by making this as a reference, and contribute to society by giving alternative perspective to the policymakers which are hoped to consider the experiences of the past learners as a reference in formulating future English education policy.

Method

This study needs a certain research design that can help to reveal in-depth data from the participants. Therefore, the narrative inquiry design was chosen. This design allows the researcher to dig deeper in understanding the process of how the individual identities are constructed and re-constructed through their lived experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) in learning English. In line with the statement, (Wirza, 2018) argued that in identity research, the individual narrative is one of the most profound ways in understanding the identity construction process.

As indicated previously, this research involved two participants, namely P1 and P2. They are both the graduates of English Education Department in a public university in Bandung and now are pursuing their master's degree. Both of them came from a middle-class family background which affected their first encounter with English and the level of exposure to the language. Even though P2 was born in Rembang, she moved to Bandung when she was still an infant and has lived there since then. Because of that, both participants had early exposure to the Sundanese language. Moreover, they had Sundanese language as local content at all school levels. However, in the school, the medium of instruction was mostly Indonesian language with occasionally Sundanese language as the local language. Therefore, the Indonesian language serves mainly as a medium of communication with other Indonesians who do not share the same linguistics background. Besides that, the Indonesian language has been learned by them since childhood as P1's mother is an Indonesian language lecturer, and P2's parents were not profound in Sundanese language as they came from Central Java. In senior high school, both participants had exposure to other foreign languages – the Japanese language. For more details about the participants' demographic information, see Table 1. below.

Table 1. Participants' demographic information

Name	Gender	Age	Linguistic Background	Educational Background	Length of English Learning Experiences (approx..)	Socio-economic Background
P1	Male	25	Sundanse, Indonesian, English, Japanese	Undergraduate English Language Education Study Program	17 years	Middle-class
P2	Female	24	Javanese (Rembangnese -dialect), Sundanese, Indonesian, English, Japanese	Undergraduate English Language and Literature Study Program	16 years	Middle-class

This study revolved around the participants' significant moments. Because of that, P2 was chosen due to the rapport and trust that has been built between her and the researcher since 2015 to ensure the richness of details of the moments. To collect the data, personal narrative and series of interview were conducted to yield necessary data. The personal narrative was done by P1 as he is the researcher. It was done reflexively by writing the personal narrative on these significant moments. As for P2, a series of interview was conducted. The interviews were done twice and lasted for an hour each. It was done in *Bahasa Indonesia* to make her relaxed and could fully express the moments.

The first significant moments they had to recall was the first encounter with English and the context built around it by including the illustration of the moments, people involved, and the conversation (if applicable). Besides that, they had to recall their experiences when learning English including the way their teachers taught them and what they did during the lesson. Moreover, they had to reflect on whether they enjoyed the learning and the strengths and weaknesses they felt in learning the language skills. Lastly, if applicable, they were expected to share the turning point of English learning and the way they cope with it.

The data collected through the reflexive personal narrative and interview were then transcribed and analyzed. By doing that, the emerged themes related to relevant events and experiences could be analyzed after some coding processes were employed. Following Riessman's (2003) thematic analysis, this study focused on the content of the story. Moreover, as this study centered on the experiences of the participants, the narratives were examined across the stories (Squire et al., 2014). By following the framework, the analysis went forward and backward in the timeline to ensure the necessary details and did not miss important events or experiences. Thus, the analysis went forward starting from the first encounter with English.

Findings and Discussion

The sections below presents the results of the study conducted to two participants: P1 and P2 related to their EFL learner identities construction. The results will be delivered in narratives as suggested in the research method as to unravel the stories accordingly. Furthermore, the discussion part will also be presented as a mean to compare the results with the theories and previous works related to this topic.

Findings

This study identified the participants' identity construction as English language learners. The identification of the early identity construction was based on Bucholtz and Hall's (2010) principle of the early emergence of identity. In the early stage of identity construction, the participants had a different experience. P1 showed little or no relevance in learning English since English was imposed on him through the school curriculum as local content. That is why he did not have genuine motivation in learning English as a language. As for P2, she was exposed to English earlier than P1 because her father listened to English songs a lot when she was still a toddler. However, she did not show any interest in learning the language except for understanding the lyrics she heard.

The First Encounter with English

P1's first encounter with English was as a local content when he was in grade 4 of primary school. He recounted:

> *What I can remember is: I was in the middle of English language class discussing a crossword puzzle with animals theme that was written on the blackboard. It was the last puzzle to solve – vertical one, six boxes. The statement was: the English word for iguana. I remember that I was repeatedly mumbling: "Iguana…Iguana…Is it Iguana?" All of my friends kept on trying to write the answer on the blackboard but their answers were kept on getting rejected. It was a coincidence that my eyes met my teacher's (while I was still mumbling). Then, with a big nod and smile, he indirectly told me that my answer – iguana – was right. I rushed to come forward overjoyed to write the answer.*

During this time, even though the encounter was as a school subject, he found it interesting. Not only English, but he was also quite interested in learning languages such as Arabic, Sundanese, and Indonesian when he was in primary level. The reason for this interest might come from his mother who is an Indonesian language lecturer. Moreover, soon after he was exposed to English, he started to play games on PlayStation that his friend bought. This introduction to technology opened up his horizon in English usage as the language interface to play the games was English or Japanese. Therefore, this new experience played an important role in the improvement of his English skills.

Different from P1, P2's first encounter was when she was still a toddler. She remembered that her father liked to play English songs and she listened to them. She recounted:

> *When I was around four or five, my father tended to play English songs cassette. The songs were from s Michael Learn to Rock and other 90's English songs. As in the back side of the cassette there were the lyrics of*

> *the songs, I tried to read it without knowing their meaning and how to read it. What I felt was only that the songs (melody) are all good and I could sing well if I could read it appropriately. Since then, I grew an interest on English language and I asked my dad such as "Dad, how to pronounce this? What are those words mean?"*

However, even though she was exposed to English early, she did not really interested in learning the language except when it was about understanding the lyrics she read and heard. Then, when she attended primary school, she was further exposed to English because English was one of the local content. So, English was imposed on her as the school subject and she had little relevance in learning it as English was not used as the primary language in her daily activities.

The Emergence of Positive Identity

In primary school, P1 found he was better at learning English language compared to his classmates. That was why his mother sent him to join a private English course run by her friend named Ms. Luci. After school, at 1 P.M. he would go to the course by *angkot* and went back home at 3 P.M. During his time here, he showed great performance and improvements in English. Until one point, Ms. Luci praised him because he could successfully answer a typically "hard" question related to plural forms. He recounted:

> *It was in grade 6 when my private English teacher said, "Wow, brilliant! I did not expect you to be able to guess the plural forms since many of my students from lower secondary level answered 'childs' instead of children". Since this time onward, I developed greatly in English as I invested more in learning it in formal and informal activities. As a result, as far as I remember, I could score no less than 90 in every English test in every level of education until grade 12. Coupled with my extensive English learning activities – through games, I could use English to communicate with my online game friends with ease.*

Because of this simple compliment from his teacher, P1 gained a boost in his academic and non-academic-achievement. He invested more time and energy in learning English as he realized that English could be his strongest point in an academic subject. Moreover, in non-academic achievement, as he played more games such as Yu-Gi-Oh, Resident Evil, and Suikoden that used English language interface, he was forced to learn the words he encountered to effectively play the games. Thus, he constructed positive identities towards English because of those reasons.

Similar to P1, P2 joined a private course from 3rd until 6th grade. She joined the course because she was invited by her friend that had already joined it. So, she did not initially join the course based on her interest in learning English. However, she also realized that she would need it since it was taught at school. In teaching English, this course offered a different way of teaching. There, the instructor taught the materials in a much more fun way such as singing or other practical activities. It was in contrast compared to the learning she had in the school which focused more on structure and grammar. Related to this course, she recounted:

> *Since grade 3, I joined a private English course…. because of this course, I excelled in English subject at school as I had learned the basics and surpassed what was being taught at school. I was very confident at that*

> *time because I was better compared to my friends. They often sought for my explanation and said, "please explain it us!"*

Because of this private course she attended, she started to have confidence in her English skills as she had been equipped with more knowledge compared to her classmates. When she attended secondary school, she was quite confident and had positive identities when it came to English proficiency. This positivity was coupled with her meeting Ms. Titin, her lower secondary English teacher. She individualized the teaching materials in order to make English became her students'. The encounter with technology and the internet as a result of globalization made her realize the importance of English. In details, P2 recounted:

> *This positivity continued in secondary school … Ms. Titin was my favorite teacher. She individualized the learning activities and also the materials such as "choose your own words and make sentence out of it." This kind of teaching style really made me understand the materials and made the vocabularies my own... She often shared her experiences when going somewhere and motivated me "If you learn English, you can go anywhere and do anything!" …also, because I started to use internet, English helped me in communicating with people around the world via Omegle and Facebook.*

This positivity last until both of the participants finished their compulsory school – until 12 grade. They felt that their English proficiency was better compared to their friends and could manage to perform well in every English subject they had to take. It was not solely because of the teachers that taught them in school but also initiated by the extra investments they did outside the school time.

Turning Point in English Learning

When both participants entered university with an English major, they realized that there was something missing from their English and it was the lack of speaking practices in the school. For P1, it happened in Speaking 1 class with Ms. Gin Gin in semester 1. He was conscious that the positive identity he had was false. Regarding this, he recounted:

> *It was the first semester at college that greatly changed my belief in my own English skills. It was a midterm exam of Speaking I with Ms. Gin Gin. The midterm was in the form of a private simple interview in her cubical. …. While waiting, I did not know what to prepare and my hands were cold and shaking. When my turn came, Ms. Gin Gin called me to enter the room. I was very nervous because I knew that my speaking skill was the worst compared to my other English skills. I sat down facing her. She asked me some basic questions ... Then she asked me "How often do you go back to Garut?" I understood the questions. However, because of nervousness, I answered "One week…….once." In my mind, I literally translate "seminggu sekali" which is "seminggu = one week and sekali = once" in the Indonesian language instead of "once a week". Ms. Gin Gin was stunned because of my answer … she gave me a little smile.*

That time, he had to do a personal interview with Ms. Gin Gin as the lecturer regarding a simple topic about daily activities for the mid-term exam. However, he was very anxious and nervous. Because of that, he could not think clearly. He understood the questions given by the lecturer and could answer the early questions.

However, due to nervousness and anxiety, he did a literal translation from the Indonesian language to English which was wrong because English and Indonesian are different in terms of word orders.

Similar to P1, P2 also experienced the distressing moment when she was in semester 1 of university life. She was in Speaking 1 class with Ms. Susi and had to present a certain topic. Because she was nervous, she did not perform well as her presentation was unclear. She recounted for this moment:

> *It was blank. When I did my presentation in Speaking I class with Ms. Susi. I was speechless and I could feel that people stared at me and saw my lecturer had a stare that was like "what is this girl trying to say?" In result, I was balelol (inaccurate and unclear) when continuing my presentation. Besides that, I felt cold sweat running over my body and my hands were trembling. I still remember how the lecturer looked at me at that time – cold. She also said nothing as feedbacks.*

This was her turning point in learning English. The confidence she built, the struggles she did, and the positive identity she constructed over the years was shaken in that instant moment. Moreover, because of her poor performance throughout the semester, she did not get a satisfying GPA. Before that time, she realized that her speaking skill was not her strength. However, she was quite confident with it because she could still survive during her years at school. However, it was the reality in university where the pressure was different and all of the students had been equipped with the necessary skills. So, the positive identity she had been constructed was false and she had to reinforce her speaking skills if she wanted to regain her confidence. Fortunately, this distressing event did not make her fall into depression as she tried to reconstruct her confidence after that.

Regaining the Confidence and Positive Identity

The distressing moment in semester 1 happened to both participants. Then they did every deed possible to regain their confidence and positive identity as English learners. For P1, since semester 1, he always tried to sign up for Ms. Gin Gin's class. It was done as his resort in covering his weaknesses in English. He knew that she would always push him to his limit in order to make him improved. Finally, in semester 5 when he took Speaking for Academic Purposes class, he was able to accomplish his goal of regaining his confidence and positive identity as an English learner. He narrated:

> *The moment that I remember was when the IELTS practice was about past events. We sat in a circle and there were not many students – maybe around 10. We practiced delivering our answers accurately using past tense in a limited time. … While not really confident, I successfully delivered my respond to the question accurately in time. She said, "nah, accurate ya using past tense." She did not smile while giving that feedback and kind of giving a "cool" face. BUT, to me, that was the first time she complimented me… Then, in the final exam in semester 5 she complemented, "Well done. Good delivery and well-prepared proposal." My practice was not in pain. Then, when the final mark showed up, I got what I expected.*

The road he took to regain them back was not easy. He has to challenge himself by signing up in a very strict lecturer's class (as his friend always said) and

strived for continuous improvement. He also had to invest more time and energy in doing so far greater than what he did in compulsory school time. The sign of approval given in the form of good feedbacks from Ms. Gin Gin was the sign that he did improve and his investment from semester 1 until semester 5 was not in vain.

In P2's case, the time to regain her confidence and positive identity was relatively shorter. She took Ms. Susi's Speaking class again in semester 3. Different from her semester 1, she did everything she could in order to show her true skills in English whenever possible. She did not want her lecturer to perceive that she could not perform well as the real reason was nervousness. This nervousness really hindered her in showing her top performance in the Speaking class. Therefore, she practiced a lot and did not give up. Related to her struggles in accomplishing her goal, she recounted:

> *Since primary school, I always kept on telling myself not to give up whatever the challenges I had to face. That event in semester 1 did not demotivate me in learning English. Instead, I kept on honing my skills so similar event would not happen again. Whenever possible, I would "show off" my skills. Once, I approached her and tried to ask her things like "Bu, what does it mean? Or else" that I did not understand. The main purpose of doing this was to show her that "Bu, look, I also can do it." It turned out that it helped me a lot in regaining my confidence. Because of this, I received a positive response from Bu Susi – she started to smile more when talking to me. Even though there were no direct compliments, this was indeed boosted my confidence and finally made me regain the positivity towards English learning. In the end, I received an A which was previously C from her.*

Her investments in learning English were fruitful in the end. After she could find a way to cope with her nervousness when talking in front of many people, she finally could show her exact English skills in front of her lecturer. The investment she did from semester 1 until semester 3 yielded the expected results. Thus, she realized that she finally succeeded in regaining her confidence and positive identity as an English learner after she witnessed the changes in the lecturer's way of communication with her in the class.

Discussion

The findings of this study have shown that the identity construction of the English learners is affected by the socio-cultural aspects surrounding them (Al Mubarokah & Prasetya, 2020; Harjanto et al., 2019; Sarie et al., 2020; Ubaidillah & Widiati, 2021). This study shows that the EFL learners have complex and rich identities before they were exposed to English. Therefore, the negotiation and changes to the identity they previously had are needed due to the new exposure they received. Besides that, the early construction of the English identity was not naturally constructed by the participants but through some external exposure (Al Mubarokah & Prasetya, 2020; Bucholtz & Hall, 2010; Mutiara, 2020). In P1's case, the exposure was from the imposed local content through the curriculum in his primary school. However, in P2's case, the early exposure was through the target language culture – songs – introduced by her father.

If I use the TESOL learner framework from Barnett and Antenucci (2006), all identities constituting the learner identity were present in both participants' early

exposure to English. In P1's case, the English learner identity was firstly evoked by the disciplinary identity as he was imposed to English at school due to the mandate from the curriculum. However, in P2's case, the first to evoke the English learner identities was the social identities especially the intercultural ones. However, later on, the identities that kept their investments in learning English were the intercultural ones due to the encounters with technology and the internet as the product of globalization. This is relevant with Gandana and Nissa (2021) and Mutiara (2020) studies that show the important role of intercultural identities in shaping the EFL learners identity.

In terms of time to construct the learner identity, P1's was faster because of his biographical identities (Barnett & Antenucci, 2006) that favor language learning. In contrast, P2's was slower even though she had been exposed to English earlier. This might be caused by the little or no relevance she had in learning English at that time. This indicates the role of motivation in learning the target language (Lamb, 2017).

In both P1's and P2's cases, it can be perceived that the role of the English teacher is important. This conclusion is similar to Lie (2017), Prabandari (2020), and Teng (2019), Wirza (2018). This indicates that not only the students that must invest more time and energy in learning English but also the teacher's investment in learning the materials and the way to deliver them is equally important in constructing a positive learner's identity in learning English. Reflecting on the narratives, the compliments and feedbacks given by the teacher played important roles in shaping it. Therefore, the teachers must be professional (Lie, 2017) so they will be able to give meaningful compliments and feedbacks at the most appropriate time.

Moreover, even though both participants developed positive identities as EFL learners during their compulsory education, it was later perceived as false-positive identities after they underperformed in a very important moment in their respective Speaking 1 classes. These false-positive identities often experienced by Indonesian EFL learners as mentioned by Wirza (2018). Because of those striking events, both P1 and P2 had to reconstruct and renegotiate their identity as English language learners.

The term investment in the understanding identity construction of a language learner introduced by Norton (2000) is considered crucial (Richards, 2021; Ubaidillah & Widiati, 2021). In both P1's and P2's case, their investment in learning English had been established when they were still in primary school. It was proven by their extensive learning activities such as joining private English courses and other informal activities. However, after the turning point of English learning in semester 1 they experienced, the amount of investment they carried out was far greater. The reason was they wanted to regain the confidence and positive identity as an English learner that was shaken by the distressing moment. Because of this great investment in the form of time spent, efforts made, or resources utilized in learning the language (Wirza, 2018), they successfully regained them. This is what Choi (2018) and Richards (2021) considered as the key to success in learning a second language.

Conclusion

From the discussion above, this study shows that the identity construction process of an Indonesian EFL learner is complex, multilayered, and multifaceted. Moreover, the process is different between individuals since they have different and identities unique to them and cannot be generalized. As they learn the language, over time, they get more exposure to the language and the culture attached to it - be it through formal education, non-formal activities, or else. Within that time, the negotiation, changes, and even contradiction between the existing identities take place because of many factors revolving around them. Thus, as English has become the lingua franca of the world, it is important to keep learning it as a bridge to understand the world but at the same time, the learners must be able to preserve the identities they have so they will not lose themselves.

Given the importance of identity construction in the learner's journey of learning English, future research should address more of the topic in other contexts. These narratives generated from the learner's experiences should be the basis of developing EFL teaching strategies or programs by the teachers as they reflect the reality that happened from lived experiences. Furthermore, these stories can also serve as the alternative perspective used by the policymakers in determining the policies related to EFL teaching and learning context.

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