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Navigating Cultural, Digital, and Social Dimensions: Empowering Student Identity in English Education

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ABSTRACT

This study underscores the intricate relationship between language learning and identity formation within educational contexts, emphasizing that identity is a dynamic construct influenced by social interactions, cultural contexts, and educational practices. **Purpose:** It explores the pivotal role of teachers in shaping students' linguistic engagement and self-conception, influencing their identities across local and global contexts. **Method:** Additionally, the study examines the impact of digitalization and intercultural competence on identity formation, while addressing challenges through reputable literature. **The findings** suggest the need for inclusive curricula that reflect diverse identities, teacher training to support inclusive practices, and the integration of digital tools to enhance identity exploration. **Implication:** Furthermore, the research advocates for support systems to help students navigate identity challenges and calls for ongoing research and evaluation to ensure that educational practices meet the needs of diverse learners. **Value:** This study contributes to a deeper understanding of identity formation in language education and offers practical implications for teachers and policymakers.

Keywords: Language and Identity, Cross-cultural, Language Empowerment

INTRODUCTION

Language and identity are inextricably linked in English language education, and they play an important role in student empowerment. The amount of research on identity has increased exponentially over the last twenty years. Proficiency in English equips students with essential communication skills, granting them access to broader educational and professional opportunities (Barnes & Tour, 2023). English serves as cultural capital because it is a global language, providing students with access to resources they might not otherwise be able to access (Nabilla & Wahyudi, 2021). It contributes a crucial role in developing an identity beyond academic success (Moná & Rodríguez, 2019), allowing students to communicate with themselves, access multiple cultural influences, and form their social identities (Norton & Toohey, 2011). Teachers need to recognize the power dynamics in language learning (Gibbons, 2002). Although English has the potential to empower, it can still be marginalized by other languages and cultures (Leibowitz et al., 2011). Henceforth, to create a welcoming and inspiring learning environment, it is crucial to implement inclusive practices, such as providing

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multi-lingual resources that integrate students' diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Khokhar et al., 2020) while promoting critical language awareness to help students understand and thoughtfully use language in shaping societal structures (Lujić, 2021). With that in mind, language is the center of cognition and the human condition, self-development, and also the construction of identity (Norton & Toohey, 2011; Gao, 2021; Oussama et al., 2023).

To illustrate, Satrio (2021), in his research, stated that based on Indonesian context, students are generally exposed to their native dialects, namely Sundanese, javanese which later became the first language. They are exposed to their regional language, along with the local culture, and also learn Indonesian, the national language that connects people across Indonesia. Some students learn Indonesian first, followed by their local language, but often, they learn both at the same time (Sukamto et al., 2021). As they reach the ages of 12 or 13, they begin learning English, a required subject in junior high schools in Indonesia. This means they grow up with their ethnic identity, the national language, and English, which brings its own cultural influences. This blend of languages and cultures leads to a reconstruction of identity (Rao, 2019; Oussama et al., 2023). In that sense, bilingual individuals might express different facets of their personality depending on the language they are using (Issn et al., 2024).

This connection to language shapes not just how people see themselves, but also how they want to be seen by others. Teachers who recognize the role language plays in the formation of identity can, therefore, implement culturally responsive teaching methods. This involves integrating students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds into the learning process (Kartal, 2011), fostering an inclusive environment where all identities are recognized and valued. Therefore, the research questions raised in this study are the followings: 1) In what ways does English language education influence the cultural identity of students from non-English-speaking backgrounds?; 2) How do teachers influence the development of students' identities in English language education through cultural, digital, and social dimensions?; 3) What challenges do students encounter while forming their identities through English across various cultural, digital, and social environments??

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language is integral to individuals' self-perception and their understanding of their position within the world (Panicacci, 2023). It is crucial in constructing both personal and social identities (Lujić, 2021; Ampofo et al., 2022), serving as a primary channel for expression and communication. Through language, individuals not only articulate their personal identities but also establish connections to their cultural heritage and community (Ayber et al., 2021). Understanding this relationship helps educators appreciate the diverse identities students bring to the classroom (Gao, 2021). The construction of identity is complex and closely linked to language proficiency (Sung, 2022). Teachers can enhance their English language skills while additionally acknowledging the linguistic diversity of their students (Wyatt, 2021). This ultimately helps students succeed in a globalized world by implementing a culturally appropriate curriculum and establishing spaces for identity affirmation. On a personal level,

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language allows individuals to articulate their thoughts, beliefs, and emotions, which shapes how they see themselves and how others perceive them. This link to language is frequently associated with an individual's cultural or ethnic heritage, shaping their sense of belonging and self-identity (Norton & Toohey, 2011; Choi, 2015; Chang, 2016). Moreover, language significantly affects cognitive processes, shaping how people think, perceive, and comprehend their surroundings (Lupyan et al., 2020). The way a language is structured and its vocabulary can determine how individuals classify experiences, tackle problems, and make sense of information (Cosgrove et al., 2023; Tzuriel et al., 2017). In multilingual settings, the practice of switching between languages, known as code-switching, can highlight and strengthen various aspects of a person's identity (Atay & Ece, 2009; Akintayo et al., 2024). By switching languages, individuals might showcase different parts of their personality or cultural heritage, adjusting their communication to suit the social context or audience (Yücel & Yavuz, 2019). This linguistic adaptability enables them to navigate multiple cultural identities, illustrating the diverse influences that shape their identity.

English language education can significantly enhance students' sense of agency, both locally and globally, by empowering them with the skills and confidence to navigate diverse contexts effectively (Norton & Kramsch, 2013). When people switch between languages, they often adopt different cultural norms and behaviors linked to each language (Shafi, 2020; Valerio, 2015), which can result in changes in how they present themselves and interact with others (Arciuli & Cupples, 2003). Taking this into account, English proficiency equips students with the essential tools to navigate complex global challenges and engage with diverse perspectives. It opens doors to international research, cross-cultural exchanges, and global networking opportunities, significantly enhancing both their personal and professional development (Sukamto et al., 2021).

Thus, the connection between cultural identity and language learning is both dynamic and mutually influential, with each shaping the other in meaningful ways (Khokhar et al., 2020; Ayber et al., 2021). This interaction is essential for understanding how learners explore their identities in educational settings and how language acts as a tool for cultural expression and identity development. As they gain proficiency in the language, they encounter new ideas, values, and viewpoints, often leading to a more globally-minded identity that incorporates elements of English-speaking cultures (Communication, 2024). This process can lead to the formation of hybrid identities, combining aspects of their native culture with those from English-speaking cultures. Research conducted in multilingual classrooms shows language acquisition can strengthen students' cultural identities (Moná & Gómez Rodríguez, 2019). This dual-language approach not only aids in language learning but also empowers students by affirming their cultural identities (Liuhuizi & Yasin, 2024). As learners navigate the complexities of acquiring a new language, they simultaneously engage in a process of identity negotiation (Zahra et al., 2023) that reflects their cultural backgrounds and aspirations (Cho, 2000).

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Other than that, technology's integration into language education has significantly impacted how students develop their identities and feel empowered (Muslem et al., 2024). Research by Lantz-Andersson (2016) highlights that social media can enhance language learning by providing authentic contexts for language practice and facilitating interaction with a global audience (Biró, 2020). Moreover, digital platforms provide spaces for students to express themselves and explore their identities. In addition Atmojo & Priyo (2020) suggest that digital environments facilitate the exploration of linguistic and cultural identities by allowing students to experiment with language in creative and personal ways.

Addressing the gap, this study aims to examine the fluid and dynamic nature of identity in the context of language acquisition, considering how students navigate their sense of self in relation to their use of English as seen from the theory of Norton and Kramsch (2013) to enrich the findings. Norton viewed identity as how individuals perceive their connection to the world, how it evolves over time and in different contexts, and how they envision their future possibilities. Influenced by post-structuralism, he described identity as ever-changing, intricate, multifaceted, and shaped by contradictions, all while being deeply connected to power dynamics (Norton, 2017).

METHODOLOGY

This study applied online research to review some previous research that discussed the relationship between language and identity in empowering students' English language. A literature review is a careful way of looking at existing research to understand what is already known and to answer a specific research question (Fadli, 2021). It helps map out the current knowledge and suggests possible future research areas (Juliana et al., 2023). Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), Google Scholars, SINTA are known to be reputable bibliometric databases. To begin, the researcher searched the Scopus, Web of Science (WoS) Google Scholars and SINTA databases for relevant material. The researcher focused the final search on reputable bibliometric databases because their broader coverage ensured accurate key findings. A thorough literature search was conducted using keywords related to language, identity, cultural backgrounds, and other relevant terms. The researcher chose 14 articles to serve as data for addressing the research questions.

Table 1. Selected Articles

Study	Type	Key Area	Indexing	Contribution
Anwar, (2020)	Research Article	Language Empowerment	WoS	Defines how language provides empowerment
Guerra et al., (2020)	Research Article	Linguistic Empowerment	Google Scholar	Elaborates the process of enabling individuals or communities to gain greater control or confidence through language education

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Nugroho et al., (2020)	Research Article	English Language Influence	SINTA	Discusses multifaceted aspects affecting way of communication
Shafi, (2020)	Research Article	Bilingualism	SCOPUS	Discusses strata of speakers' social settings, linguistic variation and social variables
Mousavi, (2020)	Research Article	Principles of Language Teaching and Learning	Google Scholar	Provides some principles of language teaching and learning
Ayber et al., (2021)	Research Article	Language and Culture	SCOPUS	Elaborates how language and culture are deeply interconnected, with each influencing and shaping the other
Gao, (2021)	Research Article	Language Teacher Identity	Google Scholar	Explores how the identity of a language teacher can influence the development of a student's personal identity
Nabilla & Wahyudi, (2021)	Research Article	Global Identity	SCOPUS	Discusses how EFL learners' identities are constructed in the classroom in relation to English as a global language
Husna & Nasrullah, (2023)	Research Article	Identity Construction	SCOPUS	Synthesizes concepts of constructing personal identity through English language education
Sukamto et al., (2021)	Research Article	Language Use, Language Attitude, Language Identity	SCOPUS	Illustrates how language use plays a significant role in language attitude and the formation of the speakers' identity.
Issn et al., (2024)	Research Article	Construction of Personal Identity	SCOPUS	Overviews aspects in personal identity construction
Communication, (2024)	Research Article	Cross-cultural Communication	Google Scholar	Highlights connection between language and culture
Muslem et al., (2024)	Research Article	Identity Construction through Digital	SCOPUS	Provides technology integration toward identity construction
Zahra et al., (2023)	Research Article	Develop Personal Identity	SINTA	Highlights personal perception, emotions, and attitudes of a person in recognizing and using a language.

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Table 1 indicates the shared perceptions of certain key areas related to identity-shaping. These researchers used the findings of these studies to generate a framework for the integration of language and identity.

The process of Conducting Library Research

Regardless of the method chosen for conducting the literature review, four essential steps were taken to produce a review that meets publication standards:

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┌──────────────────┐      ┌──────────────────┐      ┌──────────────────┐      ┌──────────────────┐
│ Designing the    │  ▶   │ Conducting the   │  ▶   │    Analysis      │  ▶   │ Writing up the   │
│ review           │      │ review           │      │                  │      │ review           │
└──────────────────┘      └──────────────────┘      └──────────────────┘      └──────────────────┘
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Figure 1. Process of Reviewing Articles

This process was developed from practical experience and is a synthesis of and influenced by various standards and guidelines suggested for literature reviews. (Snyder, 2019; Fadli, 2021)

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The raw data on this study was gathered from research validated journals. From these research articles, this study aims to draw the conclusion answering the research problems on navigating language and identity.

Shaping Individual's Identity within Educational Context

The exploration of foundational theories linking language learning with identity formation is essential for understanding how students navigate their identities in educational contexts. In addressing the research question of how individuals' identities are shaped within educational contexts, particularly through the lens of language education, it is essential to explore the multifaceted interactions between language, culture, and identity (Anwar, Ah, 2020). Nabilla and Wahyudi (2021) reveal that the formation of identity in educational settings is not merely an individual endeavor; it is deeply embedded in the interactions between students, educators, and the broader sociocultural environment. This synthesis draws from those studies to elucidate how identity is shaped within educational contexts (Gao, 2021). Most of the analyzed literature indicate that identity is not a static construct but rather a dynamic and fluid process influenced by social interactions, cultural contexts, and educational practices. In addition, Shafi, (2020) accentuates that language serves not only as a medium of communication but also as a powerful tool for identity construction and transformation, especially in diverse educational settings. This synthesis draws upon various scholarly works that highlight the interplay of digitalization, intercultural competence, and pedagogical practices in shaping learners' identities.

The concept of identity in language learning is intricately linked to the notion of investment, as articulated by Darvin and Norton (2015). The model that they proposed indicated that when language learning occurs, learners' identities are shaped by their engagement with language in

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various social spaces (Darvin & Norton, 2015). This model underscores the importance of recognizing the power dynamics at play in language education, which can either empower or marginalize learners based on their linguistic backgrounds and identities. Educators and policymakers need to be aware of the impact of identity and power dynamics on language learning. This involves creating inclusive curricula that respect and reflect diverse identities, providing support to learners from various backgrounds, and fostering environments where all learners feel valued and capable of achieving their language goals.

Furthermore, the impact of digitalization on language and culture is a crucial theme in contemporary education. It highlights that modern educational management must harness digitalization to enhance cultural and linguistic education while considering the ethical and social implications of such integration (Guerra et al., 2020). This view supports the idea that digital tools can enrich language learning experiences, helping students navigate their identities within a globalized context. The integration of technology into teaching practices, which is advocated by Atmojo and Priyo (2020) emphasizes that there is a need to align educational frameworks with digital advancements to better prepare educators for the evolving field of language education; this is aligned with what Mousavi (2020) has done; wherein, he stated that incorporating multimedia resources helps in language acquisition through dynamic and engaging lessons. Such preparation is vital for creating learning environments where students can explore and articulate their identities through language.

Table 2. A Synthesized Table of Shaping Individual's Identity in Diverse Contexts

Aspects in shaping individual's identity	Synthesis
Research Focus	Exploring how identities are shaped within educational contexts through language education (Anwar, 2020)
Identity Formation	Identity formation is influenced by interactions among students, educators, and sociocultural environments (Nabilla & Wahyudi, 202)
Dynamic Nature of Identity	Identity is a fluid process shaped by social interactions, cultural contexts, and educational practices (Gao, 2021)
Role of Language	Language is a tool for identity construction and transformation in diverse educational settings (Shafi, 2020)
Investment Model	Learners' identities are shaped by their engagement with language in social spaces, highlighting power dynamics (Darvin & Norton, 2015)
Education Implications	Inclusive curricula and support for diverse identities are essential; awareness of power dynamics is crucial for educators and policymakers
Impact of Digitalization	Digitalization enhances cultural and linguistic education, but ethical and social implications must be considered (Guerra et al., 2020

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Integration of Technology	Aligning educational frameworks with digital advancements and using multimedia resources enriches language learning (Atmojo & Priyo, 2020; Mousavi, 2020)

Teacher impact on student identities through English in diverse contexts

Teachers exert a pivotal influence on students' self-conception and their linguistic engagement with English, profoundly shaping their identities within both local and global frameworks. The impact of teachers on student identities through English language instruction in diverse contexts is a multifaceted phenomenon that encompasses various dimensions of identity formation, including cultural, social, and personal aspects (Zahra et al., 2023). The researcher analyzed all studies and theoretical frameworks to underscore the necessity of recognizing the teachers' role as a transformative agent in the language learning process. Nabilla and Wahyudi, (2021) reveals that teachers can introduce students to diverse cultures through English language materials, fostering an appreciation for global diversity. This can help students understand their own cultural background in relation to others. Communication (2024) adds that the inclusion of various cultural perspectives in teaching materials can influence students' views on their own cultural identity and how they relate to other cultures.

Viewed on social aspect, students interact with peers from different backgrounds and teachers play a role in guiding these interactions, which can affect students' sense of belonging and their social identity. Additionally, Anwar (2020) agrees that proficiency in English can influence students' social standing; in which, teachers must support students in navigating this dynamic by building their confidence and emphasizing the value of diverse linguistic backgrounds. By fostering an inclusive and supportive learning environment, teachers can empower students to navigate their identities and engage meaningfully with the English language (Guerra et al., 2020).

The engagement of students with the English language is intricately linked to their identity formation. As students learn English, they are not only acquiring a new set of linguistic skills but also negotiating their identities in relation to the language. Teachers play a crucial role in this negotiation process. Issn et al. (2024) highlights how students navigate their identities in second language academic communities, revealing the complexities of language learning as a site of identity construction. Zahra et al. (2023) emphasize that teachers who create opportunities for students to engage with English in meaningful contexts can help them develop a positive self-concept as language users. Teachers' influence goes beyond the classroom, influencing students' identities in both local and global contexts (Shafi, 2020). Broadly, in a globalized world, students from various cultural backgrounds can communicate with each other due to the universal language of English.

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Below is the hierarchical graphic summarizing the influence of teachers on student identity and English language engagement:
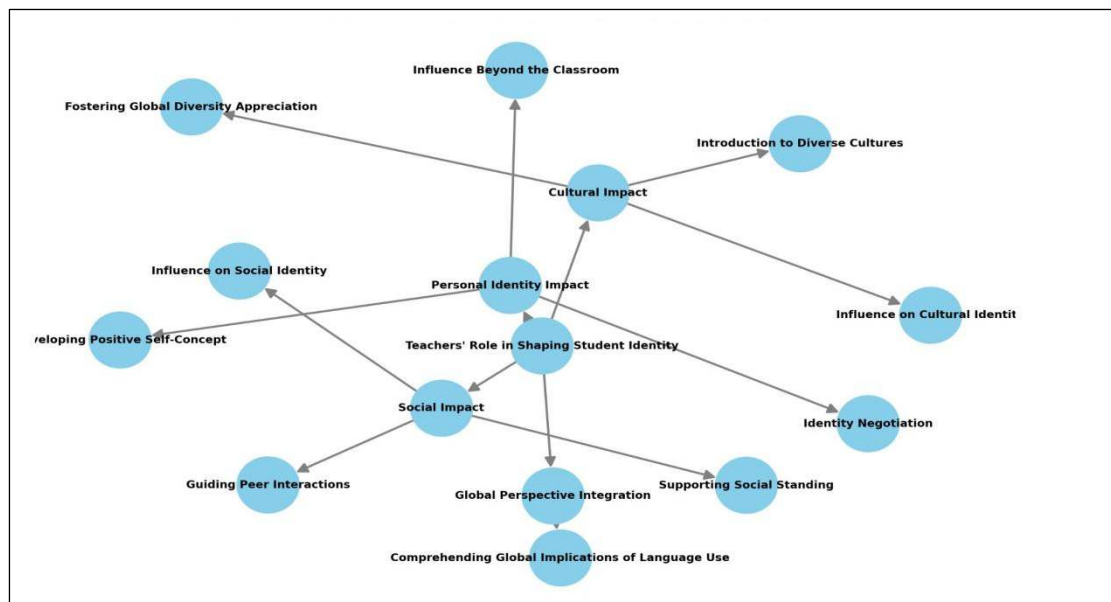

Figure 2. Teacher's Influence On Student Identity and English Language Engagement

Challenges in Shaping Identities Through English in Diverse contexts

The difficulties in using English to shape identities in a variety of contexts are complex and firmly ingrained in the sociocultural dynamics of language use. Given that English is being used by speakers from a wider range of backgrounds as a lingua franca, it is critical to comprehend how this phenomenon affects identity formation. In order to investigate these problems, this study synthesizes pertinent literature, focusing on topics like linguistic imperialism, cultural misunderstandings, and identity negotiation in English language instruction.

One important area of concern in English language education is the negotiation of identity. Students frequently have to navigate two identities when they interact with English: those shaped by their experiences with the language and those connected to their home cultures. Husna and Nasrullah (2023) highlights the significance of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) awareness in teacher education and addresses the necessity for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teachers to modify their pedagogical approaches to accommodate the diverse identities of their students.

When English is used as the primary language, there is also a risk of cultural misunderstandings. Ayber et al. (2021) points out that although English helps people from different cultural backgrounds communicate, because of differing cultural norms and expectations, it can also cause misunderstandings and conflicts. They illustrates that non-native

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speakers might find it difficult to communicate effectively when using colloquial language or cultural references that are not widely understood. This can exacerbate feelings of alienation.

One of the most significant challenge in shaping identity is language ego. The impact that language ego has on learners' motivation, anxiety levels, and general language engagement makes it an important factor in second language acquisition (SLA) (Makhubela, 2015). Even though strong language egos have been linked to increased willingness to communicate and take chances when using the target language, according to research Zahra et al. (2023), learners may not advance if they have a weak or negative language ego since they may feel self-conscious or afraid of making mistakes (Mohammadi & Akbari, 2017). This dynamic is especially noticeable when students must negotiate cultural differences and modify their communication methods to conform to new social norms.

A Summarized of Challenges in Shaping Identities

Title	Challenges in Shaping Identities Through English in Diverse contexts
Main Category	Sub-points
Linguistic Imperialism and Cultural Misunderstanding	o English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) (Husna & Nasrullah, 2023) o Cultural Norms and Expectations (Ayber et al., 2021) o Alienation and Miscommunication (Ayber et al., 2021)
Identity Negotiation in English Language Education	o Dual Identities (Home Culture Vs Language Experience) (Husna & Nasrullah, 2023) o Teacher's role in addressing diverse identities (Husna & Nasrullah, 2023)
Language Ego	o Language Ego and Motivation (Makhubela, 2015) o Anxiety and Willingness to Communicate (Zahra et al., 2023) o Impact of Strong vs Weak Language Ego (Mohammadi & Akbari, 2017)

CONCLUSION, IMPLICATION, SUGGESTION, AND LIMITATIONS

The findings reveal that identity formation and language acquisition are deeply interconnected in educational settings, influenced by social interactions, cultural contexts, and educational practices. English plays a crucial role in shaping and transforming identity, with teachers acting as key facilitators in this process. Additionally, digitalization and intercultural competence significantly impact how students navigate their identities. Educators and policymakers must recognize the importance of identity and power dynamics in language education. This requires creating inclusive curricula that respect diverse identities, integrating digital tools to support identity exploration, and addressing challenges such as language ego and cultural misunderstandings to foster a supportive learning environment. Henceforth, to enhance

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language learning and identity formation, educators should develop inclusive curricula, provide ongoing teacher training, and integrate digital tools. Schools should establish support systems like peer mentoring and encourage continuous research to ensure educational practices effectively support diverse learners.

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