Navigating Online Identities: Language Learners' Narratives in Online Spaces

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Abstract

This research investigates the construction of Saudi university English language learners' identities in online spaces, such as discussion boards and social media, analyzing how these digital environments influence their learning processes and identity formation. The primary objective is to understand the relationship between online interaction and language learning, focusing on the negotiation of identity through online spaces. The theoretical framework is anchored in sociocultural theories that underscore the profound impact of social interaction on learning and identity development. This perspective suggests that online spaces provide a unique space for identity construction and performance, playing a pivotal role in language learning. This understanding sets the stage for analyzing learners' narratives. Adopting a qualitative approach, it analyzes data collected from online discussion boards and social media posts to investigate the language learning narratives of Saudi university English learners. Through content and thematic analysis, the data is examined comprehensively to facilitate an in-depth exploration of language learning narratives within these online platforms. The findings highlight learners' motivations, such as cultural exchange and global communication, and reveal strategies for identity construction aligned with their learning goals. These narratives also reflect themes of authenticity and community engagement, which are pivotal in shaping learners' online personas. The analysis suggests that online discussion boards significantly support language learning by offering platforms for authentic interaction and identity exploration. The study contributes to educational practices by providing insights into leveraging online discussion boards to enhance language learning and suggests further research on their dynamic role in educational technology.

Keywords: Identity Construction, Online Spaces, Language Learning, Discussion Boards, Collaborative Learning

Introduction

The pervasive increase in online activity has significantly impacted various aspects of daily life, including education. According to a 2023 survey by Statista, users now spend an average of 6 hours and 35 minutes online daily. As a result, language learners are dedicating extensive hours to online interaction through personal devices such as mobile phones, tablets, and laptops. Thus, it is imperative to explore how online platforms can enrich English language learners' (ELLs) practice and supplement classroom instruction. Additionally, it is crucial to investigate the dynamics of online communication in English among ELLs and how it differs from traditional classroom interactions. Therefore, this study is informed by the following questions:

1. How do language learners engage with social media platforms for language learning?
2. How does participation in online spaces influence their identity negotiation?
3. How do learners construct their language learning narratives online?
4. What roles do peer feedback, collaborative learning, and community support play in online language learning?

Theoretical Framework

Sociocultural Theory

Language learning extends beyond acquiring linguistic skills to include communication within cultural contexts, aligning with Vygotsky's (1978) view of language as a tool for constructing social meaning and identity. Learners' identities are shaped by their cultural and linguistic contexts, which influence their participation in online spaces. For instance, discussing thoughts, opinions, and worldviews exemplifies how identity is shaped by and also shapes social contexts in which they exist. It allows people to connect, share ideas, and build a community. In the case of ELLs' online use of English in online spaces, their learning is situated within those contexts, and their identities are shaped by their participation in these online spaces.

In addition, there is a significant connection between language learning and the learner's identity, as "the desire to acquire new skills and knowledge is inextricably linked to who we want to be as people" (Hull & Katz, 2006, p. 43). Learners use the target language to convey personal meanings and cultural identities, thereby making language learning an investment in their social, cultural, and academic identities (Darvin & Norton, 2023; Norton-Pierce, 1995). The sharing of cultural practices and personal narratives in language-learning environments serves as a means of identity expression. Through the use of the target language, learners actively shape their identities and invest in building their cultural and social capital.

Communities of Practice

Communities of Practice are groups of individuals that are brought together with a shared goal or purpose (Lave & Wenger, 1991). These communities are characterized by three main elements: a shared domain of interest, a community of individuals who interact and learn together, and a shared practice. Through interactions within these communities, language and cultural practices are collectively shared and learned, influencing language acquisition and identity formation. In the context of this study, online discussion boards serve as platforms for creating communities of practice, joined by the goal of language learning in which members can negotiate and renegotiate meaning and co-construct knowledge.

The co-construction of knowledge within communities of practice is a dynamic process wherein members collaboratively create, share, and refine knowledge through their interactions and shared experiences. The role of identity in this process is crucial. As members engage in group activities, they negotiate their identities within the group, influencing their participation and the knowledge they bring. The interplay between individual and collective identity shapes the community's learning practices and helps knowledge evolve according to the diverse perspectives of members of the community.

Funds of Knowledge

Language learners' funds of knowledge refer to the rich and diverse cultural, social, familial, and personal knowledge and experiences that students bring to the educational setting (Moll et al., 1992). Incorporating students' funds of knowledge in the educational setting can enhance their learning, as it connects academic and personal experiences. Amanti (2006) states that "Local knowledge has a legitimate place in our educational institutions for both our students and our pedagogical knowledge as teachers" (p. 132). This approach validates the learners' backgrounds and promotes an inclusive learning environment that acknowledges the value of diverse cultural perspectives.

In the language learning context, specifically, integrating learners' funds of knowledge into the environment enriches the learning experience. Language is a tool for creating meaning, and when learners draw on their own knowledge and experiences while acquiring a new language, it becomes more meaningful. Supporting multiple literacies, it creates a "range of literacy practices in which ELLs engage across contexts in different languages and various modalities" (Heneda, 2006, p. 337). This approach enables learners to express their identities through language, contributing not only to language acquisition but also to a deeper connection between the learner and what they are learning. Thus creating a more responsive educational environment that supports the holistic development of language learners.

Methodology

Research Context and Design

The study was conducted at a public university in Saudi Arabia, where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL). First-year students undergo an intensive English course before transitioning to studying various subjects in English-mediated instruction (EMI) within their majors. This research utilizes a qualitative design, incorporating personal narratives, reflections, and firsthand experiences shared by participants online. The data were collected from students' posts on class Blackboard discussion boards and Padlet.

Participants

In this study, participants comprised a homogeneous group of 32 adult female EFL learners attending an Intermediate English class at a university in Saudi Arabia during the first year of their bachelor's program in the Business School. All the participants were native Arabic speakers with varying levels of English proficiency. Their ages ranged from 18 to 21, with an average age of 19. They were selected as part of a class that was taking the course together, and consent was obtained to use their contributions in this study. Data from four class members for whom consent was not obtained was excluded from the analysis.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data for this study were collected from participants' personal narratives, reflections, and first-hand experiences that were shared online on the class Blackboard discussion board and Padlet in response to specific prompts. These prompts were posted weekly and served as extensions of classroom discussions and activities related to the themes and topics covered in classroom lessons.

The data was analyzed using line-by-line coding, thematic analysis, and content analysis. Line-by-line coding was employed to maintain an open approach to the data and uncover its narrative (Charmaz, 2006). Thematic analysis facilitated the exploration of rich, detailed, and complex accounts of participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006), while content analysis allowed for the systematic analysis of large volumes of data and the identification of underlying patterns (Krippendorff, 2013).

Findings

Evolving Language Learner Identities

In the initial posts on the Blackboard discussion board, students were prompted to describe their relationship with the English language and the reasons they were learning it. Participants had consistent narratives, beginning with a lack of interest in learning English and evolving into an understanding of its significance in various aspects of life. In the following example, R.J. shared her evolving English language learning journey:

> The idea of learning the English was not important and I didn't care because I thought I wouldn't benefit, but over time, I understood that it was an important thing, whether in education or in life, so I started watching anything I love in English.

The participants collectively realized that English is important not only for their studies but also for communication, travel, meeting new people, and ordering food at restaurants and cafes. Furthermore, Towards the end of the course, many of the participants started showing a deeper connection to the English language. R.A., who is one of the strongest ELLs in the class, stated, "Initially, I believed that learning English was mainly for communication purposes. Yet, upon delving deeper into the language, I discovered its ability to forge a deep connection between myself and the vast knowledge of the world."

Notably, the most common theme found was that they saw speaking English as essential for their future job or profession. In other words, English is seen as an integral part of their professional identities. For instance, R.G. discussed the importance of English in reaching her business objectives, emphasizing that "The language will help me achieve my goals because it makes me communicate with others and thus I will gain knowledge and clients." Similarly, J.G. explained, "Looking ahead, I appreciate the importance of English in achieving my future goals. Whether it's pursuing higher education, advancing in my job, or simply touring the world, knowing English gives up unlimited options."

These examples demonstrate how learners align their language learning journeys with professional goals. This alignment shows how language is closely related to their identities: who they are and who they want to be. In other words, it shows how language learner

identities intersect with their professional identities (Cho et al., 2022), as learners see language acquisition as a tool to unlock these future opportunities.

Social Positioning

Participants in this study showed high levels of self-awareness. They used the second language (L2) to position themselves and identify their strengths and weaknesses as well as the kinds of professions that would be most suitable for them. For example, R.G. shared her outlook on group work saying, "I'm a kind of a leading personality, but at the same time I like to work alone, I'm alone wolf, but if I have to work collectively, I do it to the fullest." R.G. recognizes her preferences but also realizes that she must overcome her discomfort to accomplish her goals.

Similarly, participants were highly ambitious and used the English language to position themselves in relation to their future selves and future imagined communities (Anderson, 2020). They situate themselves in a position of importance and as having an impact on their future imagined communities. For Example, J.R. posted:

> In the future, I aspire to become a successful businesswoman and jewelry designer. My ambition is to create stunning and unique pieces that captivate people's hearts and minds. I envision myself running my own business, where I can unleash my creativity and passion for crafting beautiful jewelry.

Indeed, learning a language represents a substantial investment in learners' future social capital and how they imagine using it (e.g., Al-Samiri, 2024). Nevertheless, participants also occasionally used the online platforms to voice some challenges they were facing in making future decisions. In a post reflecting on her aspirations, G.Y. wrote:

> To be honest I have so many ambitions for the future. One of my many personalities want to have a cute little family but my other personality doesn't want that. I want to be an independent woman, living my dreams on my own, living in my dream house, just enjoying the calm life.

In this excerpt, G.Y. acknowledges her multiple identities by expressing different plans for the future. This is a good illustration of how identity negotiation is a constant struggle as it is an inherent part of it.

Global Citizens

In addition to their understanding of the importance of English for their professional goals, learners also recognize its importance as an international language and its essential role in global communication. Their online interactions reflect a strong sense of global citizenship as they actively endeavor to foster intercultural communication. For instance, B.D. expressed her love for learning English because "it makes [her] communicate with people, and most of the world speaks this language." Similarly, A.M. states, "I think learning English is fun because I love learning new things, and learning English helps me communicate better with people all over the world." Their statements reflect their understanding that language is integral to being a global citizen.

In this study, it was found that English does not conflict with local culture and traditions (Elyas, 2008). Rather than being perceived as a threat, it is viewed as a tool for achieving goals and promoting cross-cultural communication and enrichment. For example, D.N. highlighted its role in connecting with people worldwide and enhancing professional opportunities in the following written post:

> I believe that the English language will benefit me very greatly in the future when I own my own companies and make deals with companies from all over the world. The language will benefit me greatly in this and many other things, such as introducing my country, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, when I talk to visitors to the Kingdom and inform them about what our customs, traditions, and foods are.

Not only are learners eager to share their culture with the world, but they also recognize that English allows them access to diverse cultures and perspectives, shaping their multicultural identities. S.L. noted that "English opens doors to travel, global trends, culture, and understanding diverse perspectives." This sentiment is further echoed in a post by J.K.:

> There are some things that makes me enjoy learning English that not only will it make traveling easier, but English will also allow you to know more about global trends and culture. It will give you a deeper understanding of people's different perspectives on life and communicate with people who do not speak your language.

In addition, participants agreed on the impact of English media on their cultural exposure and personal development. For example, A.F. expressed how watching English media, such as TV shows and movies, deepened her interest in the language, enhancing her cultural exposure and personal growth. D.G. also explained how watching English media helped her to "understand different dialects and cultural differences in the English language, and learn to use common English phrases and expressions correctly."

Peer Connections and Support

Students in this study built strong and meaningful connections within their online community of practice. They used the online platform to share personal stories from their past and hopes and dreams for the future. The participants utilized the L2 to express different aspects of their identities that they did not get the chance to in class. One of the participants expressed this sentiment in her post:

> My opinion on using the Blackboard discussion board is that it is very useful for expressing ourselves and writing what we want on the discussion board. It also helped me to get to know my classmates more by reading their writings on the board.

One of the most interesting findings is that the participants supported their peers more than expected. They encouraged each other to pursue their goals and aspirations, expressed their faith in their abilities, validated their experiences, and gave practical advice and suggestions. This is evident in a reply that said, "It's great to hear about your ambition, [A.T.]! I also enjoy fashion and think that having a business in this field sounds exciting. Have you thought about combining your management skills with your passion for fashion?" This observation raises the question of whether this supportive behavior is gender-specific, as previous research has highlighted similar instances of female solidarity over a metaphorical sisterhood (Al-Samiri, 2020).

The participants recognized the difficulty of learning a foreign language and supported each other in their language-learning goals. They encouraged many classmates who were struggling with English. In a reply to a classmate's comment about having difficulties learning English, S.M. expressed, "Learning the English language is like a challenge for us at this age. It is very nice that you want and are trying to learn the English language. I wish you success." This response emphasizes the collective challenge and mutual support in the learning process.

Furthermore, learners demonstrated empathy in their online interactions by offering each other comfort, reassurance, understanding, and encouragement. For instance, when a student posted that she was sad that she was not accepted into medical school, another student replied, "Don't worry everything happens for a reason, Maybe you are not a doctor but I believe that u will be a good business woman." This example illustrates how learners provided each other comfort and expressed their encouragement and support.

Conclusion

Online platforms provide a hybrid 'third space' (Kramsch & Uryu, 2020) for the development and expression of identity in language learning. The advantage of online platforms in this regard is their ability to lessen the burden on less proficient learners by providing additional tools that are not readily available in classroom settings, such as online dictionaries, as well as translation and paraphrasing tools. It also allows learners additional time to consider and formulate their written responses, thus alleviating the challenges faced by language learners who are less proficient in language but are skilled users of technology.

In this study, it has become apparent that learning does not only occur through content but also through context, which supports a sociocultural perspective on language learning. English proficiency within a social context is linked to students' identities, influencing personal growth, social goals, and professional development (Palfreyman, 2006). In addition, learners' collective identities demonstrate that language learning is not just about acquiring a set of skills but is deeply intertwined with personal, social, and professional objectives. The findings demonstrate that learning the English language was not found to be in contest with local culture and traditions (Elyas, 2008); rather, it was perceived as a tool to achieve goals without posing a threat.

The implications of this study indicate the importance of language instructors creating collaborative learning environments, whether online or in person (Al-Samiri, 2021). It is suggested that language instructors incorporate online discussion boards and social media platforms where feasible. Additionally, instructors should facilitate opportunities for learners to express themselves through the L2 and empower them to exercise their agency, utilizing their existing funds of knowledge. This approach will contribute to a more dynamic and inclusive learning experience.

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