



DOES MULTILINGUALISM ENDANGER LEARNERS' IDENTITY? A NARRATIVE CASE STUDY OF ENGLISH EDUCATION PROGRAM STUDENTS

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Abstract

The phenomena of multilingualism influence how an individual constructs their identity, as language is one aspect of who they are. This study aims to investigate how five English college students view multilingualism and how it affects their sense of self. Semi-structured interviews were used as an instrument to collect the data, and it was found that their loyalty towards the local and national languages remains strong despite their exposure to the use of EFL in their daily lives. As multilingual speakers, the participants know the importance of maintaining their native language as their identity marker. Nonetheless, they agreed that being exposed to English changed their self-concept. These results demonstrate that appropriate sociocultural experience in language learning is essential.

Keywords: *Multilingualism, identity, EFL Students*

INTRODUCTION

Identity crisis is one of the main issues for English Foreign Language (EFL) learners brought on by multilingualism and multiculturalism. English students are still figuring out their social or cultural identities and self-concept in intercultural learning, particularly in acquiring additional language, and sometimes struggle with this problem (Harklau & Moreno, 2019). For example, English language learners in Indonesia are exposed to multilingualism. The utilization of three languages—local languages, Indonesian, and even English is also used in settings where English is not the national tongue. Thus, while using or learning a foreign language, this becomes a significant factor that affects and disrupts a person's true identity (Allehyani, 2022; Maher, 2017: p.101).

In the EFL context, multilingual education has been implemented as language and learning integration. The interlanguage technique proposed by Selinker (1972) is one of the methods in this system that students frequently employ, using their native linguistic proficiency to acquire a foreign language. However, according to Wang & Fan (2020), due to the language system differences, most learners cannot transfer the linguistic ability of the source language to the target language, making it impossible for them to become proficient in it, resulting in language use confusion. Additionally, according to Derakhshan et al. (2021), interlanguage

and identity are tightly associated because learners' conceptions—attitudes, sentiments, and viewpoints—can be shaped and altered by learning a foreign language, and as a result, partial or total social inclinations are unavoidable.

The use of multilingualism in education indeed offers a great deal in developing EFL students' Executive Functioning (EF)—cognitive process and mental skills (Botes et al., 2020; Brito & Barr, 2012; Gunnerud et al., 2020; Sari et al., 2018; Schwartz & Palviainen, 2016). However, the negative impacts of multilingualism that jeopardize students' identities are frequently disregarded. For example, the lack of a mother tongue, the interference of two or more languages can be destructive to language ability, and learning a new language while ignoring one's mother tongue compromises students' personal and cultural identity (Allehyani, 2022; Timmermeister et al., 2020; Turdaliyevich, 2022).

Previous studies have been done discussing the subject of multilingualism, most of them focusing on its advantages for cognitive skills. For example, studies from Newcomer (2020) and Sardor & Maftuna (2021) show that multilingualism positively impacts students and polyglot speakers, leading to academic success, critical thinking, better verbal skills, multitasking, and reduced short memories. Aside from the cognitive side, numerous studies also explore the relationship between multilingualism and identity among immigrants living abroad, migrants, and ESL learners. Based on the investigations, the findings reveal that participants agreed that their native language is their true identity (Bloch & Hirsch, 2017; Noorashid & McLellan, 2021). Moreover, they believe bi/multilingualism influences individual's identity, changes their perception toward social values, and threaten their native language (Barkhuizen, 2017; Dhanawaty et al., 2020; Fang et al., 2023; Şenaydın & Dikilitaş, 2022).

From the studies above, it can be concluded that the topic of multilingualism has been established both in social and educational settings. However, the multilingualism and identity of English language learners in the EFL context have not been much investigated. Therefore, this study is intended to fill the gap where EFL college students' perceptions regarding the effect of multilingualism on their identity are needed to understand the status quo of EFL learners' identities. Moreover, the findings of this study will be informative because they will shed light on the awareness that students need an appropriate sociocultural experience, such as processing their language identity to transform better without losing one.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Multilingualism

The use of more than one language in daily life is known as multilingualism because it is derived from the word *multi*, which means many, and *lingua*, which means language. According to Maher (2017: p.3), multilingualism is the state in which a person or group speaks and understands more than one language in addition to their native tongue with varied degrees of proficiency. Most folks are still confused about differentiating the terms bilingualism, trilingualism, and multilingualism. Nonetheless, Okal (2014) clarified that since the word *multi* denotes more than one, someone who is able to use more than one language is considered correctly multilingual. As an illustration, Indonesians are regarded as bilingual as they speak both official (Indonesian) and regional (Sundanese, Javanese, Balinese, etc.) languages (Sari et al., 2019).

To this day, it is unclear how proficient a multilingual person must be. However, Grosjean (2012) claimed that a person is considered multilingual if they speak several languages or dialects in daily life as long as they are understood by speakers of those languages alone. Let alone a few examples of people who speak multiple languages fluently; usually, there must be one more domineering language, and the others are weaker (Okal, 2014).

Multilingualism in Education

Multilingual education is a progressive and diverse approach to learning where multiple languages are used as the primary language of instruction in an educational setting. According to Garcia (2011), multilingual education serves as a vehicle for conveying information in extra languages—languages not commonly spoken at home. For example, In Indonesia, the use of local languages, Indonesian and a foreign language, for both conversational and academic purposes is a requirement for bi/multilingual Education (Walker et al., 2019).

Teachers typically use varying levels of language to educate students based on the needs outlined in lesson plans and teaching models (Yuvayapan, 2019). Besides enhancing students' cognitive or academic language skills, multilingual education also helps pupils comprehend various cultural identities to make them more civilized in the future (Garcia, 2008; Rodriguez et al., 2014, as in Yuvayapan, 2019). However, one said that rather than maintaining national identity and increasing cultural awareness, multilingualism has a risk of creating divisiveness in society.

Identity

Identity is a dynamic and comprehensive term that encompasses all aspects of identity, including unique traits, convictions, morals, life experiences, or even one's social role (Buckingham, 2008; Duden, 2022, as in Siebenhütter, 2023). In other words, a person's identity is another quality that sets them apart from others and is something they have had since birth. However, even while identity serves as a person's compass in life, it is actually negotiable—subject to change over time due to factors including self-improvement, life events, and cultural exposure. This aligns with Maher's (2017: p. 94) statement that a person's identity is less consistent because it changes with the life cycle. Therefore, identity is continuously formed and rebuilt throughout life.

Naturally, self-concept is not the only thing that comes up when we examine identity. According to Buckingham (2008), Identity refers to a connection to a larger social or communal group, including social, cultural, and national identities. These identities are inseparable and involve groups of people, making it impossible to discuss social identity without discussing cultural identity. Hall (2021) defined cultural identity (CI) as a single, shared culture that exists inside many other—a type of collective "one true self". Simply put, CI is a component of self-concept, yet what sets it apart is its relationship to a feeling of community. In addition, according to (Maher, 2017: p.100), culture itself refers to a distinct historical past whose legacy is recognized as legitimate by the state. Some examples include a region, flags, national anthem, and the most essential thing in human civilization—language.

Multilingualism and Identity

Language is a potent instrument that individuals use to express their ideas, convictions, cultural characteristics, and understanding (Maher, 2017: p. 104). Given that language shapes an individual's self-concept, it follows that a multilingual identity occurs in an individual for a variety of reasons, including social interactions, genealogy, and situations from their personal life (Forbes et al., 2021; Siebenhütter, 2023). The assertion mentioned above aligns with Maher's perspective (2017: p.103-104), which posits that language exerts influence over cognitive processes and contributes to the transformation of one's identity, as language constitutes an integral aspect of our activities and cognition.

Therefore, since language serves as an identity marker and a medium of communication for cultural and social beliefs, learning a language also entails learning about its cultural identity, lifestyles, institutional structures, and spiritual beliefs. Therefore, in an interconnected world, the preservation of language and identity among learners becomes an essential endeavor, contributing not only to effective communication but also to maintaining one true self and the enrichment and diversity of the global cultural landscape.

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative method in form of a case study design is used in this study. The main focus of this study is to uncover and gain in-depth information about students' perceptions on the effect of multilingualism on their identities (Creswell, J. W., & Poth (2007: p. 73). The participants of this study consisted of five English education program students in one of the universities in Garut. Purposive sampling was used in the student selection to identify individuals who fulfilled requirements; (1) EFL students (2) using native and national languages in daily life, and (3) using English as a medium for other activities outside of the EFL classroom (social media, cross-cultural communication, gaming, etc).

A semi-structured interview with total of 13 questions was conducted in this study since its goal is to obtain data from a phenomenon by investigating individuals who experience it (Creswell, J. W., & Poth, 2007: p.61). The data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) Thematic Analysis (TA) to get the findings. The reason why TA was chosen for this study is because TA offers logical and approachable techniques. It is the method of choice for obtaining outcomes that are clearer and more flexible.

FINDINGS

Students' Language Community

The three main communication mediums—Sundanese, Indonesian, and English play significant roles in the participants' everyday language use. This is a practice of language community where each language is used differently in each situation and function, as one of the participants recalled:

Participant 3: *"For daily activities, I use two languages, namely Sundanese and Indonesian. However, I know three languages, namely Sundanese, Indonesian, and also English."*

The response above shows that the use of three languages by students has its own portions, although one of them is more dominant in its use—for example, Sundanese as a

mother tongue and Indonesian as L2 is used more often in their daily lives. However, all of the students are indeed use English as their additional language to their native tongue.

In the language community, the five students also discussed how they used three languages in everyday life depending on situations they frequently experienced, such as at home with family, speaking with friends, and in class. Participants' responses are varied, below are each representative answer to the questions,

Language use with relatives:

Participant 1= *"... the first language, I have asked my parents, and the reason is to preserve the regional language. So, it is indeed the identity of our family."*

Language use with friends:

Participant 2= *"... it depends on participants, well, it depends on friends too. Sometimes, if my friend is as frequent as me, we can talk in English, but if he can't, we still use Indonesian too, or maybe Sundanese."*

Language use in a classroom:

Participant 1= *"Uhm, maybe around 70 per cent using English, depending on what activity and then what subject."*

The students prefer to use Sundanese with their relatives because it is their mother tongue and it's also a form of natural adjustment to their surroundings and serve as a model of respectful communication with their parents. On the other hand, when it comes peer communication settings, the participants acknowledged that the use of language to communicate with friends depends on their friend's ability to speak the language. This happened because the participants have friends from a variety of linguistic and regional backgrounds. Moreover, in EFL classrooms, students tend to use their second language (L2) as their primary language of instruction to learn English and as a practice of code switching/mixing. They admitted that using English in class is not always necessary and it depends on the course or task given.

Based on the students' language community, the researcher asked more in what situations the students always use English. The interview results indicate that the participants had high English production when using social media and gaming platforms, where they can communicate informally with English speakers from other countries. Furthermore, they use English as a medium for reading, writing, and speaking. As the participants said:

Participant 3= *"... I usually use it through social media because I have some friends who are also out of state, foreigners. So, we are required to communicate in English."*

Participant 4= *"... for example, when playing online games, I usually do call groups. Well, I very often use English because, coincidentally, my gaming friends are not from Indonesia."*

The choice of community language above is one indication of how highly exposed the students are to multilingualism in their environment. It can also be noted that they use English as a means of communication or medium for certain purposes.

Students' Experience toward The Effect of Multilingualism on Identity

Participants have been learning and utilizing English for quite some time. Some participants began in elementary school or four years before entering college. Nonetheless, according to their statements, they agreed that Sundanese is the one that represents their true identity because they were born into and grew up in a Sundanese household, and it's their first language. They also believe that Sundanese is one of the defining characteristics of who they are. As one of the students recalled,

Participant 1: *"... to maintain our identity as Sundanese people, to cultivate Sundanese culture uhm through the Sundanese language. So, I firmly believe that, uhm, language is an identity for a person."*

As students recounted their identity as Sundanese, questions were raised regarding whether the existence of L2 and EFL threatened their identity. Students believe that as the world becomes more globalized, they will be forced to study intranational and international languages in order to fit in with society. This also raises a bit of concern for them because they believe that in the long term, their native tongue will be in danger of being lost due to the mandatory use of more national or foreign languages. However, it did not occur to them that additional languages, such as English, would change their native identity as Sundanese. Although, some students admit that they sometimes feel an identity disruption where they occasionally forget that they are Sundanese or Indonesian. One of them recounted:

Participant 4: *"... when the culture is rarely preserved, for example, Sundanese, which may gradually be rarely used in the future, ... when I learn about something in the context of English, it sometimes makes me forget that I am from Indonesia, so that is it."*

However, some students disagree with the narrative that exposure to multilingualism can threaten real identity. They believe that the existence of multilingualism actually gives rise to acculturation, where there is a mixing of cultures without eliminating the original ones. They claim that their identity is not threatened because they are aware of their identity as Sundanese and use English only as a means of communication to socialize with broader people. One of the students said,

Participant 3: *"...I only use English to socialize, with only a few people, ..., It's more about just adding to communicate ..."*

Nevertheless, whether or not English replaced their native tongue, every participant acknowledged that learning English altered how they perceive the world. They recounted that outside information changes their perspective on social issues. They normalize, for instance, standards that were customary in their setting before. They, therefore, intentionally abandoned their Sundanese or Indonesian way of thinking in favour of an English one. This

happens because students are exposed to a wide range of information, and they tend to compare and contrast cultural or social values while acquiring additional language, and they will adapt to the better one. As one of the participants narrated:

Participant 1: *"In my case, some things change, for example, from the mindsets that I had before that are changed when I know new cultures ..."*

The statement above also affects how students perceive themselves when using English. They said that when they use English, they feel more confident, free to express themselves, and have a sense of superiority, because they feel English is not something that everyone easily masters. As the student reported,

Participant 3: *"... I feel cool speaking English because not many people can also speak English fluently ..."*

Participant 5: *"... I feel cool when I talk to friends who have less English skills than me..."*

From all the participants' statements above about the effects of multilingualism on their identity, it can be concluded that using more than one language does not necessarily change their native and national identities. However, some feel threatened by what will happen to their identity when exposed to multilingualism in the long term. However, they agree that learning English adds, rather than replaces, uniqueness to their identity as a form of acculturation or subcultural identity. Plus, they agree that mastering English changes their views on issues.

The Preservation of Mother Tongue

From an early age, they have been taught about the importance of preserving culture, one of which is preserving their regional language, Sundanese. Although all participants learned other languages throughout their lifetime, they agreed that Sundanese is still their "home."

Every participant concurred that preserving one's mother tongue is crucial in today's globalized society. Some are worried that their mother language will gradually become less and less used, and they fear that Indonesia will become an ESL country. Therefore, they acknowledge that the mother tongue is a valuable component of cultural identity that must be preserved. As they said,

Participant 1: *"... When I, as a young person in particular, if I didn't preserve my culture or my language, uhm, I don't feel it was right ..."*

Participant 5: *"Sundanese is crucial because the mother tongue is our own culture ..."*

Furthermore, participants felt that Sundanese, Indonesian, and English could co-exist in language use rather than taking the place of one another. They have no difficulty using three languages in their daily lives as long as they have the ability to use each language in a suitable context. For instance, they do not mix all three languages in the same context because they find it less effective and inappropriate. Therefore, the statements above indicated that

participants still strongly desired to preserve their mother tongue by using each language without burdening themselves with eliminating one.

DISCUSSION

Students' Language Community

Students in their language community expose themselves to multilingualism by using Sundanese for family, Indonesian for academics, and English for social media and peer communication, demonstrating their ability to utilize each language effectively. This is supported by Van Ek (1986, 1987) as in Baker (2001: p.130) that multilingual speakers tend to have sociolinguistic competence—an ability to communicate accurately with different contexts and intentions. In addition, they employ English as an additive language in their day-to-day activities, which helps them combine various language usage patterns into a single behavioural collection (Allehyani, 2022). As a result, speakers exposed to multilingualism in this situation are able to communicate appropriately in multiple languages (Şenaydın & Dikilitaş, 2022). Therefore, the claims of multilingualism advantages on social interaction by Antoniou (2019) and Gunnerud et al. (2020) support this study.

Students' Experience toward The Effect of Multilingualism on Identity

Due to its ability to set one person apart from another and to unite one in a shared language, particularly in terms of cultural identification (Hall, 2021; Maher, 2017), participants strongly felt that their original language was a component of their identity marker. The findings revealed that some pupils do not feel intimidated or lost their identity as speakers of Sundanese or Indonesian due to exposure to English. Consequently, this result does not support Allehyani's (2022) earlier claim that learning a foreign language can be dangerous since it ignores one's cultural identity; moreover, Noorashid & McLellan (2021) argued that additive language alone cannot define an individual's identity in isolation from cultural norms, physical attributes, and attitudes. In this present study, students agreed more on the subcultural identity (Pennycook et al., 2008: p.57), where English is only promoted for certain purpose communication within the groups or society, not as mainstream culture (Clarke & Braun, 2015), moreover, individuals also have access to and use language resources to achieve their communication objectives and to comfortably and coherently shift between customs A and B, or vice versa (Barkhuizen, 2017; Kmiotek & Boski, 2017). However, some students sometimes lose sight of being Indonesian or Sundanese while doing something in English. This phenomenon is something familiar because we cannot avoid the reality that identity is dynamic and negotiable due to personal experiences such as rearranging their self-concepts and how they show themselves in the larger social community (Forbes & Rutgers, 2021; Lin, 2023).

Participants used English to analyze issues, claiming that exposure to international knowledge and information alters their thinking. According to Kmiotek & Boski (2017) and Tong & Cheung (2011), this phenomenon is understandable because language learning involves learners acquiring specific thinking styles and comparing sociocultural values, ultimately choosing values they believe are more adaptable and modifiable in their lives. This also aligns with Pennycook et al.'s (2008:p.12) statement that language might challenge

someone's ideological language that supports a different way of thinking. English may, therefore, have an impact on one's thoughts.

Lastly, participants feel more confident, flexible, and cool when communicating or expressing themselves in English. This is in agreement with Baker (2001: p.29) and Maher (2017: p.97), which demonstrates that multilingual speakers tend to feel superior, have a higher social position, and have a “cool” life when they can speak more than one language.

The Preservation of Mother Tongue

Despite the globalization of the world, participants believed that their native tongue is crucial for their local and national identities. They even stress the significance of keeping one's mother tongue alive in order to preserve the culture. Baker's theory justifies this, which holds that speakers have a solid feeling to maintain their mother language due to several factors: (1) Cultural factors: ethnic identity strongly tied to their root language, an emotional connection to their mother tongue, and using mother tongue as the primary medium of instruction; (2) Demographic factors: low level of social mobility in the central area, environment that discourages the use of minority languages, authenticity of home tongues still solid; (3) Linguistic factors: the use of local and national languages are still widely standardized.

Furthermore, Participants deemed learning English while maintaining their native language and culture as appropriate. They were not burdened by the coexistence of Sundanese, Indonesian, and English, as they were aware of the distinctions and could choose one for effective communication (Lin, 2023). They believe that using those three languages enhances rather than contradicts one another. This lends more validity to Noorashid and McLellan's (2021) claim that the usage of multiple languages on a daily basis can co-exist peacefully without sacrificing an individual's sense of place or national identity.

CONCLUSION

The research on multilingualism and identity among English college students in an EFL setting reveals that despite occasional disruptions to their identities, students maintain a consciousness of preserving and transferring their first language. They understand the importance of sociolinguistic proficiency and function within their linguistic community, suggesting multilingualism doesn't endanger their sense of place or identity. However, multilingualism can challenge students' self-concept—their ways of thinking and feeling. Finally, since these participants are mostly exposed to local or national social and cultural traditions, the concept of losing a whole identity due to the danger of multilingualism does not apply to this study.

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