



IRAQI
Academic Scientific Journals



العراقية
المجلات الأكاديمية العلمية



ISSN: 2663-9033 (Online) | ISSN: 2616-6224 (Print)

Journal of Language Studies

Contents available at: <https://jls.tu.edu.iq/index.php/JLS>

Identity, Experiences, and Agency in EFL Learning among Iraqi Students

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Received: 11/ 2/ 2025, Accepted: 10/3 /2025, Online Published: 25 / 3 /2025

Abstract

The significance of creating learning experiences should be included in the teaching-learning process. According to studies, education should be a comfortable, enjoyable, and motivating process for kids to develop into effective, self-reliant, life-oriented learners. When students believe they can affect the course of events and feel in control of many things that happen around them, they exhibit "agency." For students, this is crucial since it makes them more engaged in their education. Every choice and action a student makes will affect other people's thoughts, actions, and choices. Although there is currently a sizable amount of research on identity in the field of language education, the question of how well students can create identities that align with the opportunities and difficulties of contemporary multilingual classrooms has received far less attention. 10 Iraqi ELT students were selected as the subjects of the study who were asked and made an interview with them. Their interviews were scored holistically, and the results might not apply to every situation. Numerous factors that may have led to more lucid findings were not

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examined because of the brief research period and the restricted interaction with the focus students. A wider range of volunteers from various age groups, personalities, cultural origins, and educational levels should be the goal of future studies. One might say the same thing about an agency. Future research can thus help us better understand our varied student body and identify strategies that effectively promote agency, experience, and identity.

Key words: identity, effectively, numerous, experience, agency

الهوية والتجارب والفاعلية في تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية لغة أجنبية بين الطلبة العراقيين

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كلية التربية للبنات / جامعة تكريت

المستخلص

إن أهمية خلق خبرات التعلم لابد وأن تدرج في عملية التعليم والتعلم. فوفقاً للدراسات فإن التعليم لابد وأن يكون عملية مريحة وممتعة ومحفزة للأطفال لكي يتطوروا إلى متعلمين فعالين يعتمدون على أنفسهم وموجهين نحو الحياة. فعندما يعتقد الطلاب أنهم قادرين على التأثير على مجرى الأحداث ويشعرون بالسيطرة على العديد من الأشياء التي تحدث من حولهم فإنهم يظهرين "القدرة على التصرف". وبالنسبة للطلاب فإن هذا أمر بالغ الأهمية لأنه يجعلهم أكثر انخراطاً في تعليمهم. فكل خيار أو عمل يقوم به الطالب سوف يؤثر على أفكار وأفعال وخيارات الآخرين. ورغم وجود قدر كبير من الأبحاث حول الهوية في مجال تعليم اللغات في الوقت الحالي فإن مسألة مدى قدرة الطلاب على خلق هويات تتوافق مع الفرص والصعوبات التي تواجه الفصول الدراسية المتعددة اللغات المعاصرة لم تحظ بقدر كبير من الاهتمام. وقد تم اختيار عشرة طلاب عراقيين من طلاب تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كموضوعات للدراسة حيث تم سؤالهم وإجراء مقابلة معهم. وقد تم تقييم مقابلاتهم بشكل شامل، وقد لا تنطبق النتائج على كل موقف. إن العديد من العوامل التي ربما كانت لتؤدي إلى نتائج أكثر وضوحاً لم يتم فحصها بسبب فترة البحث القصيرة والتفاعل المحدود مع الطلاب الذين تم التركيز عليهم. وينبغي أن يكون نطاق أوسع من المتطوعين من مختلف الفئات العمرية والشخصيات والأصول الثقافية والمستويات التعليمية هو هدف الدراسات المستقبلية. وقد يقول المرء الشيء نفسه عن الوكالة. وبالتالي فإن البحوث المستقبلية يمكن أن تساعدنا على فهم أفضل لهيئتنا الطلابية المتنوعة وتحديد الاستراتيجيات التي تعزز الوكالة والخبرة والهوية بشكل فعال.

كلمات مفتاحية: القدرة على التصرف، خبرات، هويات، محفزة، متطوعين

1. INTRODUCTION

In the field of EFL pedagogy, identity was first conceptualized as a humanistic element of second language learning but has since burgeoned into a major domain for research investigation. Identity formation relates to engagement in communities of practice, understood as systems of interrelated connections among people, objects, and the context that is built and sustained over time (Wenger, 1998). Identity is bound up with the notions of community because the two are fragile concepts; indeed, the very fluidity of the community renders identity a dynamic, hybrid, multilayered, fractured, and competitive concept. Over the last decade, issues of identity and involvement in EFL learning have gained currency due to the range of social interactions in which EFL learners participate.

Kim (2003), Lee (2014), and Teng and Bui (2018) stated classrooms as the sites of struggle in EFL teaching and learning, where language acquisition and demands impact students' identity constructs. Furthermore, they pointed out that the gap between imagined and experienced communities produces individual and social identities that are more often dynamic, interactive, discursive, contradictory, and set in their context. Building on this, identity should not simply mean "the self" (as cited in Taylor, 1989, p.5) or "who one is" (Gao, Li, & Li, 2002, p. 95). Norton (2013) defined identity as one's subject position in the world, how it evolves over time and space, and how it is informed regarding future possibilities. It is something about being oneself, and identity is about learners while they mediate the target language through human interlocutors. Identity and investment have a strong conceptual connection. According to Norton (2013), unequal power relations from learners, besides contexts, socials, and histories of language use, other forms have an impact on investment. Therefore, symbolic resources in terms of language, education, and friendship, and material resources in terms of capital goods, real estate, and money arise among primary motivations for learners to invest in a target language. The condition in which power dynamics enable restrictions of learners to speak and use the language through an understanding of investment in language learning be clear is defined by Teng & Bui (2018). Through investment, the concept also reflects socially and historically how learners themselves, as well as the target language, have come into being.

Learner identity development in EFL learning could be related to the EFL learning community. In terms of motivation, learners who develop a negative identity are more likely to make less effort in their EFL studies compared to learners who develop a positive identity. Murray and Kojima (2007) examined how a Japanese female adult student acquired a foreign language outside the classroom, and what effects that language-learning experience had on her developing identity, all within the context of a feedback loop between identity and investment. To put it more precisely, the process of identity is advanced by positive feelings and a sense of achievement in the learner. Similar research was conducted by Man, Bui, and Teng (2018) to find out whether investment can be linked to identity development, based on the data of the respondents who had studied English and Japanese. The results showed that language learning

investments were ever-changing, unfixed, and contingent upon mutable contingencies. The total self was more changes, sometimes even contradictory selves than a single, continuous, or stable self.

When studying a foreign language, engaging activities and learning experiences foster a sense of pleasure and delight. 'Learning only happens in its dynamic form when you relate it to fun,' Capra (2002, p. 28) said. therefore, these emotions and sentiments are a component of the learning process. Because of this, every activity planned in the classroom aims to increase students' sense of fulfillment. Learning activities should be created so that students may use the language in a relaxed and natural setting, according to Krashen and Terrell (1983), who also highlight the idea of doing things for enjoyment.

These days, people live in a world where reality is changing every day. As a result, language instruction has to adopt new approaches and tactics to provide a more comprehensive education that can meet the requirements of students and help them adjust to the difficulties and changes of the twenty-first century. This suggested teaching process stresses the use of both the left and right hemispheres of the brain within the new humanistic paradigm. It also incorporates information from neuro-linguistic programming, suggestopedia, communicative language teaching, and theories of multiple intelligences. These methodologies see students as critical and creative thinkers who utilize their own learning preferences, cultivate metacognitive abilities, and maximize their chances of success.

Although it is not precisely defined, agency is frequently cited as the most pervasive structure in the subject of education. Although agency is rarely systematically examined in educational research, it is mostly thought of as a product of the educational process (Rainio,2008; Barton & Tan, 2010). Students' sense of control and ownership over their learning experience is what constitutes learner agency. In a way, children who are given greater agency in the classroom grow more self-assured and responsible, which empowers them to influence their learning. Because learner agency is related to the ideas of learner autonomy, self-directed learning, self-learning, and self-regulated learning, most academics may misunderstand it (Gao, 2021). Larsen-Freeman (2019) used Complex Dynamic Systems Theory in her empirical investigation to demonstrate the interconnectedness between structure and agency. Relational, emergent, geographically and temporally feasible, dynamic, and multifaceted are some of the characteristics that define agency. We'll go over these traits of the agency in further depth. Relationships underpin agency. A human cannot be born with agency. Rather, it is "interpellated from the self-organizing dynamic interaction of factors internal and external to the system, persisting only through their constant interaction with each other" (Larsen-Freeman, 2019, p. 65).

The feelings of agency are, therefore, relational. In addition, Ellis (2019) proposed that agency is inextricably linked to affordances, or the chances for action or engagement that are provided to students within the setting. The emergence of agency. According to Kelso (2016), "embodiments of the principle of functional equivalence," agency arises when spontaneous activity is integrated with the outside environment to form a coordinative structure (491–492). In a similar vein, Miller (2014) suggested that the development of interactions with people and the outside environment might demonstrate learners' agentic

potential. Agency is positioned in both space and time. According to Emir Bayer and Mische (1998), agency seems to be shaped by the past, involved with the present, and focused on the future. According to Mercer (2012), people's ongoing lives, as well as their history and future, are all included in their agency. According to Biesta and Tedder (2007) and Miller (2016), agency is something that people may attain by using their surroundings rather than just being in them. It is not the power that they possess. Agency accomplishment is, therefore, the result of reciprocal linkages between human efforts, available resources, and structural and environmental circumstances. Tedder and Biesta (2007). Through co-adaptation and iteration, agency shifts "The starting point is initial condition is always different, and the consequences are the system's mutability," according to Larsen-Freeman (2019, p. 67). When something is repeated in a different way that differs from the original, it gives one more room to use their linguistic skills, generate new meanings, position themselves wherever they like, and express their identities as they see fit (Deleuze, 2004). A multifaceted agency According to Larsen-Freeman (2019), agency is more than just activity; it also refers to the capacity to assign meaning and relevance to objects and occurrences (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). According to Mercer (2012), participants' emotions, self-perceptions, ideas about language acquisition, and motivation—all of which are intrapersonal factors—are linked with the multifaceted character of agency.

2. TEACHER AND LEARNER ROLE

In this educational relationship, the instructor and learner come up with caring and professional relationships. They are both much more involved in continuous learning; the instructor has much more concern with what might be the background, needs, and present preferences of his learner as well as maximum and respectful communication amidst them. An environment would then be built that becomes eliciting questions, offering constructive feedback, and sharing knowledge. The teacher-counselor and friend gives 'emotional support just when it is required and helps learners feel secure and confident about second language learning'; educators also constantly support learners in their journey to acquire the second language and constantly assess interests and objectives, providing motivating lessons that are responsive to the emotional, cognitive, and linguistic needs of the learners. In it, is very important to act as a facilitator of the students to reach the point where they realize how the language works and they can do things effectively. Thus, the student becomes one involved party with a positive attitude and intrinsic motivation for learning.

3. HOW EFL STUDENTS LEARN ENGLISH FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF IDENTITY, EXPERIENCE, AGENCY.

Identity is a concept that has been unfolding in research in social psychology of language learning and use. It has since spun off as a distinct field within education. Recognition of identity as one of the primary motives of foreign language education emphasizes the centrality of processes of identity construction and reconstruction. The term 'identity' has been defined as 'the self' (Taylor, 1989, p. 5) and broadly as 'who one is' (Gao, Li, & Li, 2002, p. 95) and 'who we are' (Kanno, 2003, p. 3), continuously in a multiple-staged process answering the question of 'who am I' as a learner. The concept of identity typically involves two dimensions: identity continuity and identity change. Identity

continuity is typically defined in terms of how people understand and experience themselves as the same person over time (Bluck & Alea, 2008). It has also been argued that autobiographical memory provides for the recollection of autobiographical facts and experiences, thus the maintenance of a sense of identity continuity. Addis and Tippett (2008) posited two forms of continuity, phenomenological continuity and narrative continuity. Though recollection of past events and experiences and expectations about future events give rise to phenomenological continuity, narrative continuity is founded on integrating personal events, experiences, development, and change into a coherent story. Thus, in this sense, identity can be emplaced by continued use with the same condition or course. Yet, both identity and community are fluid, dynamic, hybrid, multiple, fragmented, and contradictory in nature. It is through this nature that identity can implicate community and vice versa. Identity is the process by which the negotiation of self is being made. This is because identity also covers the relationship between people and their social environment, personal relationships, and the relationship between people and their social surroundings (Dolby & Cornbleth, 2001).

The channels through which people move from one society to another, the establishment of fresh relationships, or the transformation/development of relationships are basic indications meant for the change and development of identity. This means that the learner's identity can only be positively and negatively shaped within the process of learning and social interactions. Identity is constantly changing and not static. It is on account of this aspect that changes occur in identity over time and space; and reproduction of the same is done through social interactions. In the real study by Gao, Cheng, Yuan, and Yan (2005), six categories of changes in self-identity emerge for EFL learners. They entail self-confidence, subtractive bilingualism, additive bilingualism, productive bilingualism, identity split, and zero change. Further research on the concept has become imperative since the results of the study by Huang (2013). The research results have underlined the potential of EFL students to release themselves from psychological constraints and then go beyond the mere level of instrumental language skills to build their self-identity. This finding gives a basis for rephrasing the question "who am I" involving all variability of discourse styles, choice or setting of a social role as well as self-awareness of learning competences, inner pursuits, etc. In this respect, both culture and situation context have an impact on the individual choice of selfhood. In the FL context, it may normally be the immediate learning context which plays a kind of dominating role in the formation or construction of learner identity.

Another major study in the field of foreign language education has been undertaken by Gao and Lamb (2011) as well as Lamb (2011), among others by Murray and Kojima (2007). Such studies implicate the link between language and identity, or the mutual influence of language learning and the development of learner identity. For example, life history research has been applied by Murray and Kojima (2007) in telling the story of a Japanese female adult learner of English and German to demonstrate how important the learning process, outside the classroom, can be in the development of learners' identity. A study such as this found when learners begin to identify themselves while learning a foreign language in their own cultural setting. The role of the learner as a language learner and language user results in personal accomplishment for the learner which reconfirms the learner's identity. Such individual identity revolves around the process and attainment of the self. Day (2002) claims that "identities only become fully learner identities when they engage in classroom activities or learn language in socially shaped classrooms." Thus, learner identity has an impact on the process of language learning. On this authority, language learners, therefore, are not unitary and stable selves; rather, they are selves that have changing and diverse aspects and constantly intersect with society through change. Normally, identity is considered to be something vague and fragmented based on the amount of knowledge that they can possess toward investment into the learning process. Therefore, an effect can be negative or positive. Low learners could take resistance or non-participation feelings when engaging in language learning, while high learners may consider identity feelings. More pain in the place one loves, there is a gap between the learning community that learners would like to have and the actual one, that also brings more resistance against language learning.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Instrumentation (Data Collection & Data Analysis)

Through ten participant case studies, five females and five males, whose identities will be constructed in a language school in Iraq, the researcher aims to be able to come to a holistic reading of how learners deploy identity, agency, and experience. The fact that the analysis focuses on their agency and experience should be duly noted, but their agency and experience in learning English are, in fact, related to other aspects of their life. Data for the case studies will be generated by six in-depth, informal, English interviews throughout four months. Data will be analyzed using the grounded theory proposed by Charmaz (2006).

Precisely this research sought to answer the questions:

1. What is it like being inside an EFL class as a learner?
2. How does a learner agency influence learner performance in EFL classes? This study was carried out at one of several language schools in Tikrit city, Iraq. Most schools provide teachers who can make their classes interesting. However, there are a few schools that are not well conducted. This was a simple random sampling of the school with an ideally suited location. Accessibility is also great in terms of easy communication with the participants. The female participants were five- two of them belonging to the intermediate group- and male participants were five in number- all belonging to the preparatory group. Upon receiving consent forms from participants, data were collected from their journal accounts, observations made by the researcher, and interviews with them. This was to allow triangulation of evidence. An interview was conducted in person.

To ensure anonymity, all names in the transcripts have been changed to pseudonyms. Participant backgrounds are summarized in Table (1).

Table 1: Background of the participants

Participants	Gender	Age	class
Student 1	Female	14	Intermediate
Student 2	Female	15	Intermediate
Student 3	Male	17	Preparatory
Student 4	Male	18	Preparatory
Student 5	Female	15	Intermediate
Student 6	Male	17	Preparatory
Student 7	Male	17	Preparatory
Student8	Female	15	Intermediate
Student 9	Female	14	Intermediate
Student 10	Male	18	Preparatory

5.THE FINDINGS

From the observation: females displayed punctuality, consistency, and organization as conscientious students. Always prepared for classes and all the homework provided by the teacher, their performance in the classes was very active. Their performances were consistent throughout. Interview responses regarding the experience elicited information that they all have experience from the prior years in learning the English language and in listening and watching movies. Also, they have been trying to speak English in the classes. Since they know that without speaking... to speak in front of their friends (...) classmates, they will not be able to learn English. We finish the classes and do different tasks together with all our friends. The agency relates to their affordances and constraints that came out during the class. On the other hand, five male students strongly believed the importance of speaking, the need to have contact with other students whose language levels would be higher than their own, and the old and new experiences as well as the outlook and prospects of those students. It is assumed that in terms of belief systems, it will most probably be the learner beliefs which will assume a very important place in their agentic system. This is believed to lay the evidence showing how learners' beliefs, self, and mind might be largely bound to each other.

In summary, all the participants described their agentic behavior and experience, which is

to say, they showed agency and experience to in spirit degrees. In other words, experiences—setting goals to strive using some strategies, bringing cherished painful failure through active performance, and belief in oneself—result heavily in language performance with full meaning. The interview contexts have foregrounded how one needs to establish an elimination-of-constraints procedure to rid oneself of these. of the negative aspect of not being able to develop as a high learner: of becoming highly agentic.

7. CONCLUSION

An exploratory case study, therefore, was carried out in a language school, taking as participants 10 students taking General English courses. What this study mainly found is that all the students who were more disposed to be agentic used more experiences. The learner who is lesser-agent tried to retain a passive stance and find it difficult to execute experiences. It is important to note, however, that this study is fairly narrow; it has only ten participants, and therefore, due to a small group and the case study methods, the results are probably not generalizable to all contexts. Other variations that would lead to more distinct outcomes were not studied due to the brief period of research and limited interaction with the students under study. Future studies should include a larger sample with participants from different ages, personality, cultural equity, and educational background dimensions. On that same note, future research will inform us better about diverse learners and effective ways through which that diversity can be achieved in terms of fostering agency, experience, and identity.

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