

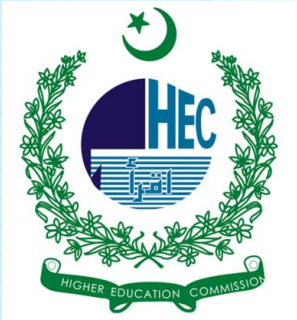
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**Crafting Voices: Exploring Language Identity Among English Majors in Higher Education**



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**Abstract**

This qualitative survey research aims to investigate how undergraduate and postgraduate English major students at a public university in Karachi construct their identities. This study is based on Norton's (2013) poststructuralist approach to identity theoretical framework and meets the local context's time requirement. A qualitative survey of 154 undergraduate and postgraduate students was conducted through Google Forms to explore these students' identity construction. Thematic analysis was performed on the gathered qualitative data, and codes were developed to generate major themes. The participants' responses provided deep insight into how the learners of English as a second language constructed their identities, keeping their past, present, and future perspectives. The findings revealed that learners negotiate and recreate a flexible, hybridised, multifaceted identity in a third place, specifically in the individuality of each person and environment and in response to social conditions across time and space. The L1 identity of the participants was found to be more potent than the L2 identity. The study also explores the implications of the findings for English major teachers in higher education institutions, aiming to understand the process of identity construction and develop strategies to develop or assess learners' personalities.

**Key terms:** Language identity, Affiliation, Expertise and Inheritance in Identity, Motivation, tertiary students, English major

**Introduction**

Language has a significant impact on shaping the identity of university students studying English at a public institution. Academics such as Miller (2000) and Bell (2001) highlight the crucial significance of language in both expressing one's identity and influencing one's participation in social groups. Language functions not only as a medium for communication but also as a mechanism for individuals to mold and articulate their identities in different social settings (Barkhuizen & de Klerk, 2006).

Poststructuralist viewpoints, as supported by researchers such as Block (2006), Pavlenko (2001), and Weedon (1997), emphasise the dynamic and complicated characteristics of identities, which change over time and in various settings. In their

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work, Davies and Harré (1990) propose positioning theory, which argues that identity is not a static concept but rather a continuous process characterised by flexible and changing expressions.

Despite the abundance of theoretical research on the relationship between language and identity, there is a dearth of studies conducted in multilingual environments. Some of the few empirical investigations that have been done include those by Choi (2015), Gong, Shuai, and Liu (2013), Atay and Ece (2009), Gao, Zhao, Cheng, & Zhou (2007), Haneda (2005), and Wong et al. (2012). Few studies have examined academic ESL contexts among children (Rymes & Pash, 2001; Willett, 1995), adolescents (Ibrahim, 1999; McKay & Wong, 1996; Mehboob, 2009), and adult learners (Lee, 2008; Marshall, 2010). However, researchers in Pakistan have explored different aspects of identity, including Durrani and Dunne (2010), who explored the conflict between curriculum and national identity; Kfir (2014), who explored sectarian violence among social groups; Rind (2015), who explored gender identity, and Rind et al. (2016) who investigated rural-ethnic identities. The majority of the research studies have been based on the relation of identity with an ascribed social factor such as gender, religion, race, etc. (Durrani & Dunne, 2010; Ibrahim, 1999; Mushtaque & Zaki, 2019; Kfir, 2014; Jaffer, 2017). Hence, investigating how English major students at a public institution shape their identities through language usage is a crucial field of study and investigation.

This paper, however, attempts to explore the identity construction of undergraduate and postgraduate students independently to capture the construct more accurately. The study seeks to answer the following research question:

What is the language identity construction of the tertiary level students majoring in English at a public university?

## **Literature Review**

Language plays a crucial role in shaping individual and group identities (Edwards, 2019). This is particularly evident in the context of language teachers, whose professional identities impact their teaching practices and interactions (Kayi-Aydar, 2019). At a national level, language is a crucial marker of community identity, with significant psychological value for its speakers (Cahyono, 2021). Tsapko (2018) further explores the potential of language identity as a unifying force, particularly in

the context of constructing a common identity through language.

### **Identity and Language**

Identity has captured the attention of many researchers due to its integration with other disciplines such as language education, social sciences, second language acquisition (SLA), psychology, and applied linguistics (Huang, 2013; Norton, 2013). Identities are not fixed, as many studies have shown (McNamara, 1997; Morita, 2004; Norton, 1997; Skilton-Sylvester, 2002); instead, they are complicated, strong, unstable, different, and dependent on the situation in social settings (Norton Peirce, 1995; Marx, 2002; McNamara, 1997; Morita, 2004; Norton, 1997).

On the other hand, individuals use language to communicate their perceptions, which have a reconstructive and transformational force (Kozulin & Vygotskii, 1986). The traditional approach to language defines it as a set of rules concerning syntax, lexicon, and phonology (Saussure et al., 1986). Later, the new theoretical framework modified the definition of language as "an array of discourses imbued with meaning" (Pavlenko, 2002, p. 283). Darwin and Norton (2014) further captured the social attributes in the SLL context by defining language as a social practice that negotiates identity through sequenced experiences.

Block (2003, 2006) clarified language identity as "the assumed and attributed relationship between one's sense of self and a means of communication which might be known as a language, a dialect, or a sociolect" (p. 35). Language identity was further related to language expertise, i.e., language proficiency, affiliation, i.e., speakers' attitude towards language, and inheritance to the language identity (Leung et al., 1997; Block, 2006). Therefore, it was concluded that language plays a major part in constructing or reconstructing identity. Peña (2007), in his quantitative research study at a South Korean University (EFL context), demonstrated the validity of language identity by highlighting the substantial difference in language identity between the participants studying abroad and those who are not. Students' perceptions of their English language proficiency also impacted their language identity. The research study by Gao, Jia, and Zhou (2015) used six constructs to measure identity. The study by Gao, Jia, and Zhou (2015) utilised six constructs to measure identity. The study's findings revealed that students with beginner-level proficiency exhibited a higher degree of negative self-confidence change.

Rezaei et al. (2014) conducted a national survey of language identity among Iranian English language learners and found that the participants experienced identity change after learning the English language. Ambreen (2015) also examined the identity construction of second language learners, i.e., Pakistani students, at Lahore College for Women in Punjab. The findings revealed that identity is fluid and changes over time. Ambel (2016) investigated identity construction and language learning in her ethnographic research. He discovered that some essential social elements, such as race, religion, gender, and social class, strongly influence socialisation processes in students, ultimately affecting their identity construction and language learning.

Similarly, Rezaei (2018) studied the association between English learning and professional identity change in PhD students in Iran. Results showed that the participants experienced identity change after learning the English language. Researchers found that female participants demonstrated more significant commitment to three professional domains than their male counterparts. They all shared positive perceptions of learning English for their professional growth and development.

### **Identity and Second Language Learners**

During the 1970s and 1980s, researchers scrutinised language learners' identities as individuals showcasing tangible learning and motivational patterns. However, these identities later underwent modifications, redefining them as fluid, context-dependent, and influenced by the context (Norton & Toohey, 2011). Likewise, it is considered that the language learner begins their expedition with their past experiences, which motivates them to invest in English language learning formally (in educational organisations) or informally (family experiences, surroundings, newspapers, television, etc., or community interactions) (Umrani, 2016).

### **Identity and Motivation**

Numerous applied linguists (Gao et al., 2003; Ryan, 2006; Yashima, 2002; Yashima & Zenuk-Nishide, 2008; Zhu et al., 2021) made efforts in the EFL context to understand language motivation under the scope of identity development. Later on, a new trend against behaviourism led to the emergence of cognitivism, an essential step in the evolution of motivation. This movement was based on Chomsky's notion that language, rather than behaviour, consists of a system of rules and infinite sentence

structures. Veronica (2013) explained that language creativity and the idea of choice were two integrated concepts of language learning that had a meaningful impact on motivation. Similarly, Pakistan has extensively researched motivation towards English language learning (Akram, 2007; Shahbaz & Liu, 2012; Nausheen & Richardsson, 2013; Akram & Ghani, 2013; Rehman et al., 2014; Noreen et al., 2015; Yasmin & Sohail, 2018; Rasool & Winke, 2019; Yasmin et al., 2019). However, these studies have not taken into account the impact of motivation on identity construction.

### **Identification, Negotiation, and Construction**

Skilton-Sylvester (2002) believes that language learners must negotiate and modify their identities according to social realities or circumstances. Negotiation here means how the language learner declares ownership to different social communities and how this ownership constructs or reconstructs with time. Hansen and Liu (1997), Norton (1997, 2000, 2013), and Marx (2002) share the belief that language serves as the primary means for language learners to navigate their social identities within the learning context. This is because language is the only tool that allows individuals to gain or lose access to various social groups. Furthermore, when language learners converse with other members of a particular group, it negotiates or reconstructs their identity within the social group they are a part of (McNamara, 1997; Morita, 2004; Peirce, 1995; Norton, 1997).

Umrani (2016), in her research study, also argued that human creatures are social performers who live in numerous social groups. Therefore, in the process of learning a language, individuals not only acquire new skills but also negotiate their identity and future aspirations through language. This motivation for future direction produces the possibility for investment in multi-layered identities (Norton, 2000). She further concluded that the construction and negotiation of their language learner identities involve other categories such as gender, social class, ethnicity, and linguistic affiliations.

### **Developmental Stages of Learners' Language Identity**

Identity is considered both the source and the consequence of language practice. Language shapes identities, but identities also change language, leading to the intricacy of the relationship between language and identity (Joseph, 2004). Rassokha (2010) posited that discourses and communications establish identity, thereby

necessitating the provision of specific learning environments where individuals can frame, sustain, reconstruct, or modify their identities. She continued with her study by following Lacan's (1977) and Foucault's (1980) concepts, i.e., the strong relationship of language with identity. They asserted that discourses shape identity positioning. According to Phan (2008), the more languages you speak, the more identities you have. Thus, anyone who speaks multiple languages may have multiple identities without knowing their linguistic practices or cultural and linguistic resources. Rasookha (2010) defined this stage as unexamined language identity and classified learners' language identities into three developmental stages, as shown in Table 1. Mushtaque and Zaki (2019) tabulated these stages in their research on the language identity of tertiary ESL learners.

**Table 1: Developmental Stages of Learners Language Identity**

<b>Stages</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
1. Un-examined language identity communicative  underpinnings of L1	Learners are incognizant of their own  behaviour, cultural, and linguistic  & L2
2. Language identity search  selected  create  with larger  community	Accommodating learners for self-identification  exposing discourses and experiences of  members from similar language identities to  a keen awareness of associating themselves  linguistic community instead of the L1 ESL
3. Language identity achievement and	Learners acquired skills to display confidently  monitor their language use, adopt analytically

the approach of own self-recognition and  
salient

attributes of language and its speaker

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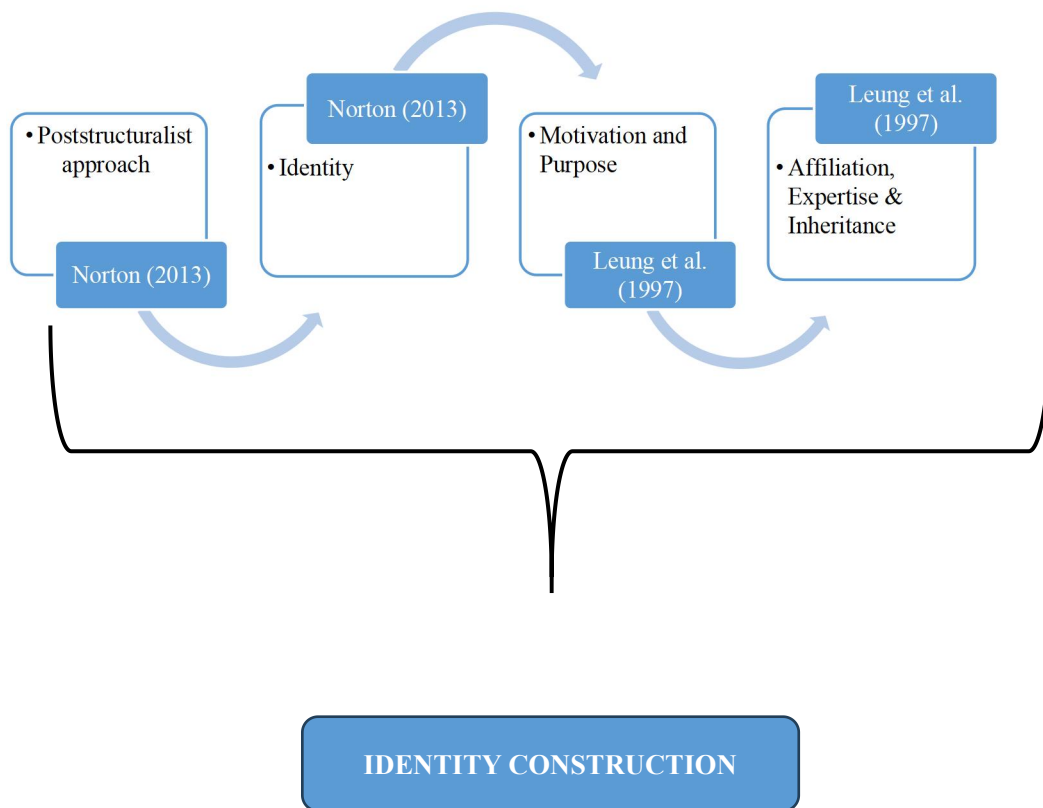
Source: (Mushtaque, S., & Zaki, S. 2019, p. 23)

### **Theoretical Framework of the Study**

The theoretical framework of this study is based on the poststructuralist approach presented by Norton (2013). The Poststructuralist approach explores how a learner's social context influences and molds their motivation, attitudes, and language learning beliefs. The poststructuralist approach views language as symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991) and an instrument to facilitate social mobility, a possibility of higher education and professional advancement.

Poststructuralist approaches also highlighted language as the ground for identity construction and negotiation. Further elaboration revealed that L2 learners and users participate in a discursive practice involving adopting specific subject positions and positioning others as "others." Norton (2000, 2013) asserted that the social context, SLL, and users, acting as agents, shape identities. Participants can reach specific positions by forming advanced discourses. In this research study, the theoretical framework, founded on motivation and the poststructuralist approach, enables the researcher to investigate the construction of language identities among tertiary-level English major students, considering social context components, motivational factors, and their attitudes and beliefs. This theoretical framework, which explores students' identity construction, bases the significant construct of identity on purpose, affiliation, expertise, and inheritance, as proposed by Leung et al. (1997).





**Figure 1 Theoretical framework of the study**

### **Methodology**

#### **Research Method**

In the current research study, the qualitative method guided the researcher in exploring the construction of the identity of undergraduate and postgraduate students regarding the English language. This study employs a qualitative research method, emphasising the identification of individuals' comprehension, behaviour, and experience (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006).

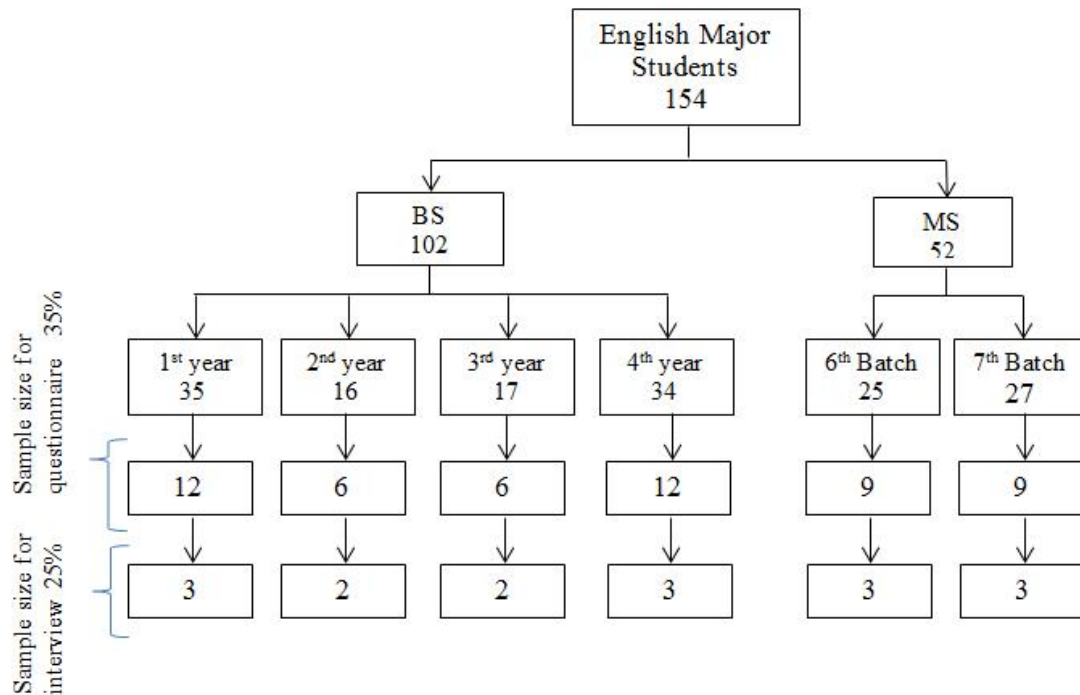
#### **Research Design**

For the current study, a survey is the chosen research design. In their 1972 study, Stenius and Cunningham illustrated two types of qualitative surveys, i.e., open (or inductive) and pre-structured (or deductive) qualitative surveys. Thus, the present study applied a pre-structured qualitative survey, pre-determining and developing the constructs and dimensions by incorporating concepts and theories.

#### **Target Population and Sampling Technique**

The target population consisted of 154 students from a public university's

undergraduate and postgraduate programs in English and Applied Linguistics. Among them were undergraduate (BS) students (n = 102) and postgraduate (MS) students (n = 52). The population consisted of 5% males and 95% females. The quota sampling technique was employed for this research study. Figure 3 displays the population distribution.



**Figure 2 Distribution of the Sample**

### **Data Collection**

This study employs a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview to explore the identity construction of the participants. The study's theoretical framework guided the design of the questionnaire. It consisted of two sections. Section A collected demographic information from the respondents, including their name, gender, discipline, current semester, place of birth, place of upbringing, current city of residence, ethnicity, mother tongue or first language, other spoken languages, type of schooling, academic background, parents' education, and preferred language for communication. The second section helped the researcher probe the participants' feedback on identity.

In addition to the questionnaire, we also conducted semi-structured interviews, which provided a detailed and in-depth comprehension of the process or situation (Cohen & Manion, 1994). Open-ended questions were developed to interview 16

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participants and to triangulate the data gathered through a questionnaire. After reviewing the literature and selecting a theoretical framework and constructs (identity), 7 question items were formed. Probes were added at the time of the interview against participants' responses, where required, to clarify their identity construction. The first step of this interview protocol was to provide a general introduction to the participants, followed by an inquiry into their identities.

Three experts with postgraduate degrees in relevant fields currently teaching English at the tertiary level validated the tools. The experts shared a few suggestions that we incorporated into the revised tools.

## Study Procedure

The present study was conducted in the Fall semester of the academic year 2019. Stages are discussed in Table 2.

**Table 2:** *Study procedure*

Stages	Coordination	Activities
1st	literature review and theoretical framework	Development of an open-ended questionnaire and semi-structured interview protocol
2nd	3 Experts	Experts' validation.
3rd	18 students of English major	Pilot study and
4th	Researcher	Tool analysis
5th	Chairperson of the department	Departmental permission
6th	36 BS/ 18 MS	Informed consent and Google survey
7th	10 BS/ 06 MS	One-to-one interview.
8th	NVivo 12	Coding and thematic analysis
9th	Results	Development of Themes and sub-themes

## Ethical Considerations

In order to protect the anonymity of the participants, we used pseudo names or codes, such as M6F\_8 and B4M\_3, to refer to their specific responses recorded during the data collection process instead of their original names. For example, M stands for postgraduate, six numbers for the 6th batch, F for female, and eight after the underscore indicates the eighth participant. Similarly, B is for undergraduates, four is

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for the 4th batch, M is for males, and three after underscore is for the third participant among a total number of respondents. Overall, for postgraduate (M), sixth and seventh batches were included, and for undergraduate (B), 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and fourth years were included. This confidentiality initiative protected and secured the research participants from any mishap or disciplinary concern (Patton, 2015). To ensure that the data gathered was interpreted in its original form, the entire data was analysed objectively.

## Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was carried out to explore the identity construction of the tertiary level students. Nvivo 12 was used for the data analysis—nodes assisted in the development of codes, subsequently leading to the generation of themes. King (2004) suggested that we should not consider themes final until we have thoroughly read the complete data and scrutinised the coding at least twice. The study organises its findings according to the research questions.

## Findings

### Demographic Information of Participants

The participants' demographic details include their gender, age groups, current degree status, mother tongue, association with educational sectors, and language usage (see Table 3).

**Table 3:** *Demographic information of participants*

Gender	Male	Female	BS Students	MS Students
	19%	81%	67%	33%
Age Groups	15-20	21-25	26-30	Above 31
	33%	39%	19%	10%
Mother Tongues	Urdu	Sindhi	Punjabi	Others
	78%	4%	3%	15%
Association	Public	Private	Cadet	Missionary
	79%	17%	2%	2%
Languages	Monolingual	Bilingual	Trilingual	Multilingual
	2%	59%	26%	13%

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## Identity Construction

Thematic analysis of the qualitative data revealed the following subthemes: motivation and purpose, identity and language in terms of affiliation, inheritance, and expertise.

## Motivation and Purposes

The first four questions of the questionnaire were based on the motivation to learn the English language and its purposes. In response to these questions, the majority of the participants shared that they were extrinsically motivated to learn the English language. These external factors were the *"rising demand and scope"* [B1F\_1] of language in today's world, and further, all *"sorts of information are provided in English"* [B1F\_10]. The participants also discussed the diversity of the English language, stating that it "facilitates communication with people across the globe" [M6F\_8], as well as "academic and societal pressure" [B4F\_3], [M6F\_4], and [B4F\_8]. Some participants added intrinsic motivations like language interest, saying, "I have also been interested in studying it for my degree" [B2F\_1].

Furthermore, learning a language for various purposes significantly influences learners' motivation. In continuity, most respondents said they had language skills and wanted to use them in the same field. They chose the English language also because of their interest, as it was the primary language in which they started their academic life, and they *"always liked English as a subject due to the way it was taught in school"* [B1F\_11]. Participants also acknowledged that the English language provides career opportunities, research spheres, and social media space. Likewise, some participants chose the English language because of its "attribute to provide academic and learning facilities."

Additionally, the respondents conversed positively regarding the past benefits of the English language. Past experiences also have a significant influence on learning, motivating learners to continue investing in English language learning. Concerning this notion, the participants shared multiple benefits. Such as *"an English teacher"* [M6F\_7], *"research and content writing"* [B2F\_6], social status, career advancement, financial benefits by getting *"jobs"* [M6F\_3], [M6F\_5], [M46F\_8], [M7F\_9], *"earning money in the past"* [B4F\_3], and more.

The interview protocol's findings revealed nearly identical responses. The

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participants emphasised the importance of learning English as a major motivator. All interview participants accepted the importance of English in the present world. Similar to the questionnaire responses, the majority of respondents accepted that it is “*a kind of Lingua Franca of the world*” [B1F\_2], [B2F\_2], [B3F\_1] [M6M\_3]. A few of the respondents also acknowledged that “*moving abroad for higher education*” [M7F\_2], [M6M\_3], and English language skills are compulsory. Additionally, some students mentioned in their interviews that the English language is important because it encompasses “*extensive knowledge and technological advancement*” [B2F\_3], [B3F\_1], and [M7F\_3]. Likewise, participants also emphasised the English language’s importance due to its “*need of the times*” [B1F\_2], [B4M\_1], and also because it is the language of “*power, social status, and prestige*” [M6M\_3], [B4M\_1], and [B1F\_3]. Therefore, the participants' responses aligned with the questionnaire findings, indicating that learning the English language provided both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation.

### **Identity and Language (Affiliation, Inheritance, and Expertise)**

Language plays an important role in identity construction. Proficiency is one of the major factors that helps learners develop language skills and expertise. According to the questionnaire responses for the above theme, the majority of participants showed a positive attitude and a low level of expertise in language proficiency. They shared that they have developed their language skills and considered themselves “*above average in English language writing, reading, and listening.*” [B2F\_], [B4F\_3], [M6M\_8], [M7F\_9]. Additionally, participants reported that they have improved their communication skills, which they previously struggled with, and are now able to understand a sufficient number of actual utterances found “*in movies and other authentic materials.*” [B4F\_9], [B4F\_3], [B2F\_6]. Some participants viewed themselves as non-proficient users of the English language, assuming themselves to be in the language learning process as they were adopting the new concepts, structures, vocabulary, etc., and citing “*there is still more to learn.*” [B1F\_6], [B4M\_1], [M6F\_8]. They perceived the English language as distinct from their mother tongue, practised their native language more frequently than English, and believed they were more proficient in their native language. The participants mentioned that they typically “*use Urdu*” [B2F\_4], [B1F\_7], and [B1F\_3].

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In terms of expertise, language affiliation plays a crucial role in helping learners develop their identities. About this element of the theme of this study, the majority of the participants explained feelings of disempowerment and detachment while using the English language. They disowned the English language and were more interested in "*empowering their language.*" [B1F\_4], [B1F\_8], [M6F\_3], [M6M\_8]. In addition to the questionnaire results, the interview protocol findings revealed that the participants had the same sense of belonging to their native language when they switched from their mother tongue to English. The majority of the interview participants experienced an increase in "*confidence.*" [B3M\_2], [B3F\_1], [B4F\_2].

### **Discussion**

Extrinsic or instrumental motivation drove most of the participants in the current study to learn the English language. The study identified several external factors that drove the majority of participants to learn the English language, including its vast scope, increased demand for the language, personal interest, potential academic skills, ample opportunities, English's global status as a language of communication, Lingua Franca, status and prestige, and language culture. These findings were consistent with the findings of Othman et al. (2019), Miltiadou and Savenye (2003), and Huitt (2001). Furthermore, almost all students acknowledged the importance of the English language. The findings showed that English is essential, primarily due to its position as a Lingua Franca and global language for communication. Several linguistics scholars (Graddol, 2006; Crystal, 2012; Jenkins, 2015) have considered the English language as a lingua franca, as well as an "international language" (Rubdy & Saraceni, 2006). Other factors that bolstered the significance of the English language included academic and professional advancement, social status, power, prestige, instrumental motivation, current needs, modes of ideological modifications, and employment and career opportunities. This study's findings are consistent with those of Nair (2014).

Most students stated that they wanted to pursue a career in the English language because of their interests. Some learners prioritised academic purpose, communication purpose, and career orientation. The findings of this current study are similar to those of Feltman (2018) and Rehman et al. (2014). Additionally, the English language provides multiple benefits to its learners. The study's participants expressed that the English language facilitated their career and professional growth, enhanced

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their academic and communication abilities, and broadened their understanding of technology, literature, and other disciplines in the past, given that they had learned it since childhood. Furthermore, students were found motivated to learn the English language in the future due to the maximum advantages it provides in the current modern period of globalisation. They shared that it will be beneficial for them in terms of higher studies, international connectivity, providing extensive and innovative knowledge, and developing interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. These findings align with the research findings of Ahmad et al. (2018). Similarly, Takkaç Tulgar (2019) conducted a content analysis of his longitudinal case study to examine identity. His research revealed that the language learning process influenced the participants' identity formation on educational, cultural, and social levels. Additionally, the participants' identities influenced the progress of language learning through instances of raising awareness towards identity.

The findings of this study revealed that even in the past, English enjoyed the status of a privileged language in Pakistan's sociopolitical environment. The historical attachment to the English language in postcolonial times created a system of values and ensured its dominance socially and politically. It provides wide chances of economic gains for the people who learn the English language. Most of the students in the current study declared themselves non-proficient English users due to a lack of knowledge, grammar, pronunciation, and exposure to the language. The students expressed that they are making every effort to improve their comprehension and communication skills and are employing various strategies to progress more effectively than in the past. Similarly, when asked about their affiliation or empowerment with the English language, the students responded in a variety of ways, expressing a sense of attachment to its use. They want to use the English language only when necessary and do not deny the attributes it carries, such as social mobility, societal values, power, status, prestige, and so on.

Moreover, the majority of the participants demonstrated a strong sense of attachment to their native language while also acknowledging that the English language introduced new values, beliefs, ideologies, and cultures to them. Similarly, after learning the English language and embracing a new language identity, the majority of participants demonstrated improved expressive attitudes, as well as an



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improved nature and personality. These findings were similar to those of Hansen Edwards (2020). Nematzadeh and Narafshan (2020) similarly identified the positive changes that occurred in the participants' personal and second language identities in their research study. People adopted new identities because they had access to new social, cultural, and linguistic resources.

## **Implications and Conclusions**

This study incorporates a qualitative survey approach that deals with learners' L2 identity construction of the English language in a particular context. Therefore, due to its limited population and context, the implications of this research study may not be generalisable or universally reflected. The current study also provides pedagogical assistance to English language teachers and language learners. The study will motivate them to incorporate specific interventions and innovative strategies into their teaching practices to achieve effective outcomes and foster the development of confident and independent learners. The teachers may understand and acknowledge the complexity of their multiple identities in the context of second language learning. Conversely, this research study carries significant implications for learners. Learners may gain an understanding of their multiple identities, which they are constantly negotiating or reconstructing, leading them towards becoming responsible and active members of society and the global world.

Ultimately, researchers discovered that learners possess a fluid, flexible, hybridised, multifaceted identity, which they negotiate and reconstruct in a third space. This third space represents the uniqueness of each individual and context, reconstructed in accordance with social circumstances across various time and space periods. The participants were found to be more inclined towards L1 identity as compared to L2 identity.

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