

## Understanding the Complexities of English Learners' Identities in an Intensive English Programme

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### ABSTRACT

Language learner identity has been heavily researched in the field of applied linguistics and there is considerable data that demonstrates the complexities of the development of identity. This study contributes to our collective understanding of the interplay of students' linguistic identities and how immersion programmes abroad can influence that development through the theoretical framework of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (SCT). Within this theoretical framework, this naturalistic case study aims to capture some of the attributes and qualities of English Language Learner (ELL) identity. This investigation consisted of three participants at an intensive English programme (IEP) in the United States who were selected via purposeful sampling – a prospective doctoral student from Thailand, a prospective master's student from Uruguay, and a prospective undergraduate student from Kuwait. Data collection consisted of a series of student interviews, researcher observations, and instructor reflections. Through triangulation, the researcher engaged in thematic coding which yielded results that language use of both English and their native language(s) were influenced by the IEP context. Pedagogical implications of translanguaging and creating an inclusive learning environment via cultural competencies are discussed. This study demonstrates how the complex experiences of studying abroad for ELL students yield unique insight into the ever-changing linguistic identities of our students.

*Keywords:* Acquisition, English, identity, immersion, language

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### INTRODUCTION

While studying abroad with the intention of language immersion is observed across many global universities, there is a common misconception that students' language development will be inherently supported

by their experience abroad (Bejarano, 2013). The examination of the construct of identity could yield answers to the complexity of language acquisition within the framework of Sociocultural Theory (SCT). To support our international students, it is necessary to take into account the influence of the development of their linguistic profiles on their language learning experience.

## **RELATED LITERATURE**

Vygotsky's SCT emphasised how students relate pedagogical material to their world psychologically and physically through social mediation (Poehner, 2008). Identity and language acquisition relate in that language is an aspect of culture and interrelates to identity as an ever-changing feature (Pre, 2021). They are further related in the way that "every time we speak, we are negotiating and renegotiating our sense of self in relation to the larger social world, and reorganising that relationship across time and space" (Norton, 2010, p. 350). In language learning, language identity is affected by the new negotiation for identity and renegotiation of self in the target language.

## **METHODS**

Within the interpretive perspective, this phenomenological case study captures the collective lived experiences of three students within an Intensive English Programme (IEP) (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The main source of data was two sets of semi-structured interviews conducted in isolation with each participant to obtain a formative understanding of the participants' perceptions of the development of their own identities. Classroom observations with field notes were collected within each content area (e.g., reading, grammar, listening, etc.). Data underwent qualitative thematic coding to generate categories and patterns across the experiences of the three participants for data analysis (Saldaña, 2021).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The results of this study demonstrated four patterns across the experiences of all three students. First, data showed that the students developed negative perceptions of their native language(s) during their participation in the IEP. Despite this negative sentiment surrounding their native language(s), all the students used their full linguistic repertoire (i.e., all their native language (s) and English as an additional language) in class, either prompted by a classmate, instructor, or external entity. Another dominant theme that emerged was that students demonstrated a need to limit the use of their native language(s) to learn English and that it was not acceptable to use their full linguistic repertoire through translanguaging (Meateus, 2014). For example, one of the participants shared how she believed that her English language development suffered at the cost of using her native language and that she should spend more time (even outside of school) using English.

## CONCLUSION

In this study, the experiences of the three students studying abroad at an IEP in America were observed to be influenced by their respective identities. Through the use and context, negotiation of their linguistic self-perceptions, and the role of language identity negotiation in their linguistic profiles, the complex development of identity development was documented, supported by the conceptualisations of identity by Norton (2010). Implications suggest linguistic representation is essential in IEPs to use the students' native language(s) to help with the comprehensibility of content while supporting identity development which can be accomplished through translanguaging. Finally, it may help students overcome negative perceptions of their native languages for educators to nurture students' cultural competency through the study abroad experience (Deardorff, 2006). The consideration of identity within the discussion of language development can support more equitable learning experiences for international students.

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