

## NAVIGATING IDENTITY: STUDENTS' CULTURAL JOURNEY IN ENGLISH WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

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**Abstract:** Language is a fundamental component of culture, facilitating the exchange of cultural knowledge and the formation of identity among cross-cultural users. This study investigates EFL students' intercultural experiences and how these experiences are reflected in their writings as they attempt to negotiate and maintain their cultural identity. As a part of English language learning, producing written texts requires comprehension of linguistic traits entangled in culture. The success of foreign language learning has a greater chance when cultural considerations become integral to the learning process. Therefore, lecturers and students must recognize the inseparable relationship between language and culture and that culture is not limited to the ways it is expressed through words. The data were gathered from students' argumentative essays on a culturally sensitive topic and analyzed using Ivanič's identity framework, focusing mainly on the autobiographical and discursive selves, supplemented by in-depth interviews. The findings indicate that despite diverse cultural experiences, all students expressed similar perspectives on the issue, aspiring to be recognized as individuals with a moral foundation inherent to their culture.

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**Keywords:** written discourse; cultural experience; culture; identity, EFL students

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### INTRODUCTION

Culture evolves over time through interactions, exchanges, and adaptations among different groups and societies. It encompasses the shared beliefs, customs, traditions, languages, symbols, norms, and practices of a particular group of people. The ways people act and think are closely influenced by the culture they believe in, adapt to, and live in. It shapes their behaviors, perceptions, and interactions within their social environment. Riley (2007) defines culture as the established, classified, and shared knowledge within a "social knowledge system" (p. 39). Active participation in community practices contributes to obtaining culture, which varies among members, and being a part of a given society does not mean that all the members belong to the same culture (Riley, 2007). However, once they are a member of a cultural community, even after they have departed, they may continue to preserve a standard set of norms for thinking, believing, and acting (Kramsch, 1998).

The topic of culture promptly leads to a discussion on identity as they are fundamentally and analytically intertwined. Identity entails individuals' social roles and cultural experiences and has been one of the focal points of discourse studies in the past few decades (Rasmussen, 2017). Defining identity without considering culture, social position and participation, experience, and personal aims would be ineffective as the intricate tapestry of cultural experiences influences the multifaceted nature of human identity. It is a discursive phenomenon that involves acts of

manifestation as people express and present themselves every day in a variety of ways, such as the way they dress, walk, talk, and many other ways. Just as culture, Goffman (1956) in Rasmussen (2017) argues that identity is not a fixed idea; rather, it is a performative-based concept and is shaped by continuous active engagement that is adjusted to the situation and the people involved.

In written discourse, identity, known by the term ‘voice,’ is frequently used to describe how writers convey their personal views, authoritativeness, and presence (Hyland, 2008, p. 5). According to Matsuda (2015), the writer’s identity is not confined to the writer, the text, or the reader alone; instead, it emerges from the interpersonal meaning that is negotiated through the interaction between the writer and the reader, facilitated by the text. Writers develop their identity through their discursal choices (Işık-Taş, 2018) and the resources they draw upon, allowing the readers to discover a little about them (Wakerkwa et al., 2019). Studies on identity generally aim to examine the way writers convey themselves in the way they deliver the information and how it connects with the perceptions that others have about them. The theory in identity studies sees beyond language use as a cognitive-related phenomenon; it believes that language use is fundamentally a social endeavor. The ways writers portray themselves in their texts are closely related to their writing and cultural experiences.

Several linguists have proposed a framework to identify identity in writing (Ivanič, 1998; Hyland, 2008). In his framework, Ivanič suggests four ways of thinking for understanding the complex nature of identity in written discourse: “autobiographical self,” “discursal self,” “self as author,” and “possibilities for self-hood” (p. 23). The autobiographical self is the identity people bring with them in their writings, which is associated with the “sense of their roots, of where they are coming from,” which is “socially constructed and constantly changing” (p. 24). Discursal self denotes the impression of the way writers want to sound, influenced by the values, beliefs, and power relations in which the text was written. Self as author is concerned with the writers’ sense of being the author established in their texts and how they are perceived by the readers. In possibilities for self-hood, he believes that every individual has access to various identities and discursive resources that are socially available to them.

Cultural identity refers to one’s sense of belonging to a particular community based on cultural factors such as nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, and religion. It is constructed and sustained through the communal exchange of collective knowledge that involves traditions, heritage, language, norms, and customs. Hall (1990) states that cultural identity can be perceived in some different ways, one of which is that our cultural identities are shaped by shared historical experiences and cultural norms, offering us a sense of unity and consistent understanding despite the changing and unpredictable nature of our history. In educational discourse, cultural identity is

closely associated with the concept of multicultural identity, as it is frequently through the lens of multiculturalism that cultural identity is revealed (Bennett, 1998; Zilliacus et al., 2017).

Some studies have delved into the complex interplay between culture and identity, asserting that culture plays an indispensable role in shaping the mosaic of individual identities (Holliday, 2010; McLean, 2013; Matsuda, 2015; Rafi, 2017; Zilliacus et al., 2017). Rafi (2017) examines Pakistani students' Facebook conversations to determine if bilingualism encourages the merging and disseminating of local identities in the international discourse while at the same time explores how these bilingual students highlight social identities and power relations in digital discourse (p. 254). He finds that the identity marker was primarily conveyed in the practice of code-switching between English and Urdu and the use of a variety of linguistic and paralinguistic features. His findings underline the position in the social system determines the dominance of particular linguistic forms.

A study by Zilliacus et al. (2017) sheds light on the diverse cultural identity discourses prevalent in Nordic educational policy. They believe that how students' identities are perceived and discussed in the educational discourse in Finland and Sweden is greatly influenced by their national curricula. They investigate the discursive construction of students' cultural and multicultural identities in Finland and Sweden's national curricula. Critical multicultural education and essentialist and non-essentialist views of identity reveal diverging discourses in the two countries. The Finnish curricula see every student as having "multilayered and multicultural identities" compared to the Swedish curriculum which is more essentializing in nature.

At the time this study was conducted, the issue of cultural identity in the Indonesian context received little attention it needed. Hence, this study attempts to discover how Indonesian students demonstrate their identities through discursive choices to represent their stance on an issue and how their cultural experience contributes to their identity development.

## **METHOD**

The data were collected through a document analysis and interview. The participants were three female students with diverse cultural experiences. They were asked to write an argumentative essay on the Western gender phenomena, a particularly sensitive topic in Indonesia. However, the psychological traits considered in this study solely address their experiences and cultural identity, going beyond gender concerns. The argumentative essay was selected due to its persuasive nature, which allowed further investigation of the psychological process of identity formation and manifestation. The students must also show their stance on the phenomena and respond to counterarguments to showcase the downsides to strengthen their claims.

The students' essays were analyzed in terms of the communicative purposes and the implied message through the linguistic choices using Ivanič's (1998) identity framework. Of the identity aspects he proposed, this study concentrated primarily on the autobiographical self and discursual self, excluding the self as author and possibilities for self-hood identity aspects. This consideration was made in light of the study's objective of examining how the students portray their cultural identities through discursual choices independent of the potential identities available to them.

An in-depth, open-ended interview was later conducted with the participants to get a close understanding of the psychological factors in the writing process. Additionally, the interview aimed to validate the results obtained from the analysis of written data. The interview focused on the students' viewpoints about the issue and the rationale behind them, their cultural experiences, and the ways in which these experiences have shaped their perspectives. The questions were also designed to elicit information about how they define themselves as writers, how they chose to position themselves on the topic, and how they wanted readers to perceive them as individuals. For a detailed explanation, the findings are displayed and discussed descriptively.

## **FINDING AND DISCUSSION**

The findings are presented individually for each participant, along with excerpts from their essays and interview transcripts that are the most pertinent to cultural identity.

### **1. The First Student**

The first student began her essay with a general introduction to the topic, highlighting the status quo of the issue in the public eye and how the majority of society perceives it. Her counterposition was emphasized in the thesis statement. Moving on to the second paragraph, the student took it to show the negative impact this issue has on her sentiment. She argued that besides the effects the issue has on her, it could also provoke debates in many domains of society.

[E1-1] ... *phenomenon makes me feel uncomfortable, insecure, and unsettling... this will conflict with those who agree.*

[E1-2] ... *it makes humans oppose God's will.*

[E1-3] ... *but it is important to remember that there are restrictions of freedom ...*

In the second paragraph, she provided religious reasoning to support her claim, as shown in excerpt 1-2, aligning with Indonesian philosophy as a nation devout in faith. She agreed that the issue is controversial but argued that it must be discussed, considering its gradually shifting status in Indonesia. She believed that this phenomenon contradicts the beliefs and norms of Indonesian people and culture. She claimed to be pretty vocal about this issue and often brings it up in her conversations with friends. Her confidence in discussing such a sensitive topic stemmed from her

cultural experiences (U1-1) when she had the opportunity to immerse herself in a different culture during her visit to another city.

Her autobiographical self is presented as she reflects on her experiences within which she has heard, read, and watched such a controversial issue. Ivanič (1998) argues that identifying a writer's autobiographical self can be challenging, as it may operate at a subconscious level. However, this aspect of identity is derived from individual's aspects of life that led them to write the way they do. Thus, delving into the writer's history and cultural experiences is crucial for identifying this sense of self. Moreover, her religious beliefs significantly influenced how she portrayed herself in her text. Regarding her discursal self, she drew on her choices of discursive features that signify a persuasive approach while simultaneously adhering to academic writing norms, which can be seen in her use of boosters exemplified by the phrase "it is important to remember" (E1-3).

[U1-1] *I became a more laid-back person, I saw that wherever they are, they can be themselves, but here people are usually afraid to be judged, but people there are just more expressive.*

[U1-2] *I want people to see me as a person who strives for the right things.*

Her cultural experience contributed to her development as a student and as a person at the same time. McGinnis et al. (2016) propose that students' opinions on complex issues are shaped by their participation in diverse sociocultural activities, influencing their perspectives and making them a product of their cultural engagements. This acculturation also had an impact on her identity, as acculturation plays a crucial role in reshaping identity and can lead to changes in psychology and behavior, as supported by verbal data (U1-2).

## **2. The Second Student**

Firstly, she used the word 'debates' in her essay title, clearly indicating her stance in the conversation. In the first paragraph, she provided general information and discussed the historical context of the movement related to the issue without explicitly revealing her position. She then proceeded to outline the current state of the issue, noting the extensive debate surrounding it.

[E2-1] *Issues and debates regarding this phenomenon are increasingly heating up.*

[E2-2] *... in my opinion, it is very detrimental in terms of social, religious, cultural, and other aspects.*

This student was also adamantly against the phenomena for religious reasons and other reasons related to the negative impacts it brings. She argued that, even though some people hold

a positive view of it, she believed its adverse consequences outweigh any benefits, especially for teenagers.

In terms of the autobiographical self, rather than the self that is represented in the text, it is the “self which produces a self-portrait” (Ivanič, 1998, p. 24). It means the writers’ experiences guide their disposition in a particular situation, depicted in their discourses. Drawing from her cultural beliefs, the second student strongly opposed Western gender phenomena. She developed her autobiographical self through her perspective that, even though is mutually agreed in her social environment, is authentic to herself, as evidenced in excerpts 2-1 and 2-2. In these excerpts, she stated the negative social, religious, and cultural implications of the issue, reinforcing her viewpoint through analytical reasoning, which is authentic to her.

[U2-1] *In my opinion, this is a social and cultural deviation and is against Indonesian cultural values. Also, I personally think this phenomenon makes no sense. God has created ...*

[U2-2] *I want to be able give positive influence to people about this issue. I want them to believe me*

According to her, this phenomenon is deemed absurd because it is against the nature of human beings (E2-2). She built her discursual self as an academic writer by softening her opinion with phrases, such as “in my opinion,” a practice known as hedging. Hedging is an important strategy in academic writing to negotiate uncertain claims and mitigate potential opposition (Hyland, 1998). The use of hedges varies with cultural differences, disciplines, genres, and communities (Liu & Tseng, 2021). This student presented herself through her cultural and religious perspectives while at the same time employing logical reasoning to substantiate her opinion.

Furthermore, her religious faith influenced her perspective on the issue. Overall, she aimed to convey her message in the best way possible for readers to understand and believe (U2-2). Discussing controversial issues could cause ethical dilemmas for the students, affecting how they interpret and represent their stances on issues perceived as sensitive within their cultural environment (Hemmings, 2009).

### **3. The Third Student**

The third student started the essay by raising a question to capture the readers’ attention. Compared to the previous two essays, this one is longer and richer in description. She showed a similar viewpoint to the other students, opposing the normalization of the issue. Despite their different religious and cultural backgrounds, they shared the same norms and values.

[E3-1] *I recognize that we live in an era of society that values freedom of expression, however, I don't think it is necessary to understand and acknowledge this issue.*

[E3-2] *I believe that all Indonesian share a common ground and are seeing this issue through the same lens.*

This student has had more varied cultural experiences due to her mobility across cities and countries. She spent many years abroad, where the cultures differed significantly. As she lived, socialized with the people, and participated in some cultural activities, she had to adapt and adopt the local customs and behaviors. Cauce (2002) argues that during acculturation process, identities undergo changes as individuals adjust and embrace elements of the surrounding culture. Her years overseas profoundly influenced her in many aspects, including her perspective on certain issues.

Those experiences were demonstrated in her essay as shown in excerpt 3-2, in which her autobiographical self is developed. As she mentioned the current global state of freedom of expression where acknowledgment of individuals' life choices is held in high esteem, she believed that recognizing Western gender phenomena in Indonesia is unnecessary. Her understanding of freedom of expression came from her social and cultural experiences, which she gained through active engagement in intercultural communications.

On the other hand, the discorsal self was established as she constructed her persuasive voice by using discorsal choices specific to argumentative writing, such as "I don't think" and "I believe." This finding aligns with Ivanič's (1998) principles, where he suggested a few guiding questions to address the discorsal self in a text, one of which is "What are the discourse characteristics of particular pieces of writing?" Adhering to conventional norms of a particular genre is a way of expressing one's discorsal self. Making deliberate choices that are expected and acceptable to the intended readers is one of the characteristics of this identity.

[U3-1] *My experiences shaped me into who I am today. And by that, I mean including how I perceive myself as a person, as a student, and as a part of the society.*

[U3-2] *... the differences are huge ... But, maybe because it is still a part of Asia, so they also have the same perspective about this issue.*

Her multicultural experience contributed to a complex cultural identity which supports Bhurga's (2004) idea that identity evolves through migration and acculturation. Exposure to diverse cultures broadened her perspective and fostered a greater respect for different beliefs. Despite her rich cultural experiences, when discussing this phenomenon, she remained grounded in her native culture and religious beliefs while also showing respect toward counter opinions. She subtly expressed her opposition to the issue through words and phrases such as shown in excerpt 3-2. She believed that explanations should extend beyond cultural and religious reasons,

citing some health-related factors as the most scientific and rational justification for opposing the issue.

Just like culture, identity is dynamic. Personal characteristics, the environment, and interpersonal relationships directly and indirectly influence personal identity development. The cultural similarities between the two countries she was and is living in shaped her views and ways of thinking and expressing her opinions. Initially, she was challenged with the continuity of her identity in its acculturation into other national societies (U3-2). The challenges lie in maintaining the original cultural identity and adapting to the new cultural environment (Amoah, 2013). Nevertheless, she retained her cultural identity while adapting to new cultural norms, promoting a stronger, more cohesive sense of self (Cauce, 2002).

To summarize, all participants primarily based their opinions on nationality, religion, and local customs. Religion predominantly influences the polemic surrounding gender issues in Indonesia. As a significant aspect of cultural identity, religion plays a crucial role in shaping their attitudes and positions on the matter, which is in line with findings from Holliday's study (2010). One of the participants in his study firmly state that among several cultural features, religion is the most essential feature of her cultural identity. Bhugra and Becker (2005) also support this notion, asserting that religion helps maintain communal values and enhance social cohesion.

Each aspect of identity in Ivanič's model uniquely contributes to the writing process and the overall expression of self within written discourse. The findings in this study underscore the importance of personal experience, roots, sense of belonging, and authorial agency. By cultivating a nuanced understanding of these identities, writers can enhance their ability to communicate effectively and authentically while remaining true to their cultural values and beliefs, ultimately leading to a more profound connection with their audience. Matsuda (2015) postulates that developing the writer's identity involves intentionally presenting oneself by expanding one's range of repertoire and becoming more conscious of the impact of their choices. Moreover, Gurin et al. (2002) emphasize the educational benefits and cognitive development derived from diverse cultural interactions, suggesting that exposure to various cultural experiences can lead to relational discontinuities, crucial in identity construction.

## **CONCLUSION**

Cultural experiences are intrinsic to shaping someone's perspective and the distinctiveness with which they present their voice. The cultural environment in which we are raised and reside imprints upon us a unique set of norms, values, beliefs, and practices that carve our perspective. Engaging with different cultural experiences broadens an individual's perspective. It enables individuals to approach situations with empathy and a multitude of lenses that can appreciate the

multifarious realities of others. In the educational setting, the students should be encouraged to learn about other cultures to facilitate understanding if they encounter multicultural affairs. The teachers and lecturers can assist the students in navigating and expressing their opinions in a manner that is both respectful and persuasive.

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