

## The cultural perspective of a socially mediated approach to language learning motivation and identity formation of a Saudi scholar: a case study

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**Abstract:** This paper reports on a longitudinal case study of a Saudi scholar who has been sent on a scholarship to study for his Ph.D. in a tertiary context in Australia. Through exploring this case's development in his academic endeavour and EFL learning experiences, the researcher examined the case's interactions with his peers in his new cultural milieu. Explored also were the case's previous experience and his vision of his possible future self trajectories when he comes back to King Khalid University. The study examined how the case's concept of self developed out of his experiences and the connections he has already made between the new cultural environment and his native culture and how these have influenced his language identity development as a language educator.

**Keywords:** case study, acculturation, native culture, target language culture, language learning, motivation, language identity

### 1. Introduction

There is a plethora of research on the interrelationship between language learning and acculturation, exploring the value and belief systems related to foreign language and culture learning (e.g., Blackledge & Creese, 2010; Conteh, Martin & Helavaara & Robertson, 2008; Lytra & Barac, 2009; Lytra, 2011). Much of this prior research, usually done in the ESL context, has been exploring language use in a socio-cultural milieu in order to recognise the socio-political and economic factors which help in (re)formulating the human identity of EFL learners in the social/cultural context of native speakers. In this new socio-cultural melting bowl, such issues as multilingualism, multiculturalism, and attitudes towards the language and its native speakers play an important role in (re)formulating the new identity of language learners more effectively and more rapidly as well (Issa, 2008; Lytra & Barac, 2008; Lytra, 2011). Some research shows that non-native English speaking students (NNES) are usually challenged by several difficulties in their accommodation to the requirements of their graduate studies in English speaking, Western-style universities (Andrade 2006). In this regard, Myles & Cheng (2003, p.247) explicate that the “main challenge is to become acculturated into a new academic and cultural community”. Indeed, this difficulty influences the development of their new identities in ways that consequently influence their professional careers and their perceptions of their own identities (Hayes 2009, Singh & Han 2010). NNES students’ problems are mostly related to identity reformulation often affected by a set of socio-cultural factors Myles & Cheng (2003, p.248) have saliently put forth:

Graduate students, in particular, feel intense pressure to succeed because many of them have scholarships and/or jobs in their native country to which they will return. In addition to language barriers, which can impede effective communication, many of these students have personal challenges, such as finances and family support; psycho-social challenges, such as making new

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friends, isolation, loss of social status, and understanding the rules that apply in specific social situations; and academic challenges...

Research shows that there is a potentially significant correlation between social contact with the host culture and the social adjustment of international students, e.g., NNES. There is also a potentially interactive conflict recognised in most of this research between the native culture of these students and the host culture (Al-Sharideh & Goe 1998; Mekheimer, 2011). Such relationship can possibly affect not only the academic achievement of those students, but also their social adjustment, language learning, and acculturation (Westwood & Barker 1990; Mekheimer, 2011; Mekheimer & Al-dosari, 2011; Zaid, 2011). The reason why social contact is important for cultural learning inasmuch as it is for language learning is that the socio-cultural environment, including language as a greater denominator, provides the most crucial factor for language and identity growth, adjustment; it is also a source of for raising self-awareness and developing a new language identity (Zaid, 2011). In this regard, Varghese, et al. (2005, p.37) have wittily observed that language learning is “a process of identification – that is, of acquiring an identity, of becoming someone or something”. Tacitly put, language “learning, identity, and language practice are interrelated constructs” (Hung 2008, p.41). Language and academic knowledge are important factors influencing academic progress in such environments (Abel 2002; Zaid, 2011). By the same token, there is a shrewd, intangible interaction between academic and non-academic factors, including cultural, social, intellectual and personal adjustments that these students have to make in order to accommodate to these new foreign learning environments (Myles & Cheng 2003).

Usually, NNES scholars of EFL/ESOL programmes are located in specific social, historical and cultural contexts (Singh & Han, 2010) where social contact is considered as an important factor that affects their identity development. Therefore, it is important to examine the impact of this shift in identity from being young English learners and teachers in Saudi Arabia to graduate students in native language environments and how this further affects the teaching of English and its culture back in Saudi Arabia. Such a transition can pose gigantic challenges, including a reassessment of the individual teacher’s identity, self-image, and professional knowledge. It is also important to explore the perceptions of such NNES scholars as to how they have adapted socially and culturally to university life in and outside the classroom in order to deepen our understanding of some of the concerns of these students as they reflect on their experiences in the academic community of a native language milieu. Therefore, the present investigation examines the case of of a Saudi doctoral student, originally a teacher of English in a South-western Saudi university, who has chosen to pursue his doctoral study at an Australian university. The study explores how the beliefs and identities of this Saudi scholar changed and developed during his doctoral studies in Australia and what his anticipated career plans would be after his return to Saudi Arabia. In other words, the study explores the EFL teacher identity being reshaped in a native language community, and how this newly shaped identity affects EFL teacher preparation programmes in Saudi Arabia.

## **2. Methodology**

This study utilizes in-depth interviews to investigate the socio-cultural encounters of a Saudi scholar in a new socio-cultural environment of one of the English speaking peoples within the inner circle of English-speaking countries (Wee, 2002; Kachru, 2006), and how these environments assisted and / or hindered him to gain access to this new environment, building his new identity, and helping him gain access to the teaching profession in his EFL contexts back home. Methodologically, there has been a more holistic approach towards the detection of ideas from case study interview transcripts and other qualitative data gathering methods exploring the perceptions of the participant as to the effects of culture on language learning.

## **3. Results**

Following is a portrait of the case study participant that provides background information describing the socio-cultural context of his learning experiences, social life in the new communities, and his future plans in Saudi Arabia, against a background of his prior teaching experiences in Saudi Arabia, and how these prior and new experiences in the new social milieus have helped to reformulate his language and social identities.

Ali's (a pseudonym chosen for our case at his request) academic record tells of a hard-working, distinguished student. His psychological profile describes him as a quiet, intelligent, subtle, refined, socially-adept, resourcefully manipulative, convincing, and caring person. A graduate in the English department, College of Languages and Translation, KKU, he worked in college as a teaching assistant. Getting his master's from the UK, he returned to KKU as a lecturer. Ali has taught English for about two years in King Khaled University as a junior staff member, and then he moved to a British university for his MA in Applied Linguistics with a concentration in TESOL. After two years, he came back to teach at KKU in Abha for three years, when he was planning to study for his PhD study in the University of Melbourne, Australia. Interviews with him exposed him to be as an experienced EFL English teacher and a graduate TESOL doctoral student in an Australian university. The interviews reflected his identity, self-image and challenges he has faced during different stages in his career. Although he had received solid English reading training in Saudi Arabia and was good at writing tests, Ali struggled during the first semester. He realized he had never learned English in a functional way. Initially, he had to practice thinking in English. Now, his earlier training for translating and applying test-taking strategies was of no use in Australia to help in his writing. Despite the difficulties he faced, he pushed himself hard to become involved in class discussions and put questions to teachers and native speakers he met on campus. Within this English environment, he was amazed to find his listening and speaking ability improving.

Being an ESL learner helped him create a new learning identity and develop a new point of view about his own personality. Ali noticed that some of the international students who stuck together were always quiet in classes. After one-and-a-half years doing his master's programme, one of Amer's friends still needed Amer's help to book a flight ticket on the phone, even though he later completed his degree. Ali believes that those who did not participate in class discussions were wasting time and money being in Australia. Ali attributed his acculturation to his personality. He realized there were always difficulties; however, he equipped himself with an open-minded and flexible attitude. To succeed academically was not as easy as adjusting culturally and linguistically. It took Ali about a year to gain confidence in himself in the TESOL doctoral programme, and to be able to present, discuss, or even debate in front of his class in English, and to express his ideas and comments in academic writing.

To understand professors' lectures is not an easy job for me but to discuss and do group work with classmates is even harder. My classmates came from different countries, and they all had different English accents so it was a real challenge understanding them. However, it was also one of the most fascinating parts of my experience in the TESOL doctoral programme in Australia because it involved dealing with cultural matters which I told my students about when I taught in Saudi colleges.

Back home, he returned for a while to gather data for his dissertation, teaching college writing, reading, listening and speaking. His life was very tense then, but he handled the challenges from both jobs well, during the day as a lecturer, and at night as an English teacher in a private institution for teaching EFL courses. However, most of his satisfaction came from teaching in which he used a lot of authentic materials in his class:

Before, when I taught in Saudi Arabia, I thought only practical things were useful for my students; the issues and materials used in research articles are kinds of works in ivory towers that were provided by researchers without dealing with students' needs and the real situation in the classroom ... To some extent, I still feel the same way now. Second language acquisition, curriculum design, different teaching approaches, theories of linguistics, and examining cultural aspects and technologies have broadened my view and strengthened the foundation for my teaching career.

Ali said his scholarship in Melbourne helped him expand his teaching and cultural experiences and to overcome such deficiencies back home. Ali is ready for the challenges that face him, and is preparing to devote his future life to teaching EFL in Saudi Arabia, both the language and the culture of its nativespeakers as he experienced it in Australia.

#### **4. Discussion And Analyses**

As can be deduced from the interviews with our case study participant, there was high value placed upon the need to use English to communicate in the class and, generally, support expressed in principle for a communicative teaching approach. As he once told me,

I try to find how I can encourage my students to speak more English and to acculturate themselves to the culture of native-speakers of the language.” He believed that this could create motivation for language learning on the part of his students back home in Saudi Arabia.

Researchers of Second Language Acquisition theories have pointed out that different affective variables such as a learner’s motivation or personality will determine successful language learning. The learners’ attitudes about the target language community, including people, culture, and their coursework decide how non-native speaking graduate students perform. In this vein, my informant also believed that using a communicative language learning approach will likely decrease any cultural shock he may experience when these learners will be given similar chances of learning abroad.

Coming to a Western cultural environment, the case study participant experienced different degrees of cultural shock. McKay (2000) described that culture is the “hidden curriculum” in the classroom and may influence the process of teaching and learning. In fact, learning a second language in school is not just an educational challenge but also a social-psychological challenge. In fact, language use is inextricably connected to the construction of identity (Hung 2008). According to Gonzalez (2004), international students may be able to speak English correctly from a syntactic and grammatical perspective, but they may not have the language fluency to be “thinking cognitively, affectively, and socially”. Therefore, nonnative students may have difficulty adapting to the academic and social needs of western cultures. Academic success is viewed as their primary goal, even though cultural adjustment and language adaptation might present difficulties in their sojourn overseas. However, English proficiency is considered a crucial attribute among those who wish to be players in their global society.

Therefore, the need arose for English teachers at different educational levels. Overseas experience and a master’s degree would qualify a teacher to apply for an English teaching job in an English language learning school or college. Recently, however, a doctorate in a specific major has become mandatory for those wishing to apply for a teaching job at college level. This policy has moved away from the concept that, “If you come back from any English native-speaking country with a master’s degree, you can teach English.” With this being a misconception according to my informant, there is a need for current and prospective ELT scholars to become culturally prepared to teach not only the English language, but also its culture which is essential to the development of overall English language communicative and pragmatic competencies.

## **5. Conclusions**

This case study participant’ experiences, entailing access to authentic language outside the class, while studying abroad had a significant influence on his own acculturation into the English language and its culture while studying the language in a native context. This is actually a broad, patently planned goal of formal university scholarship programmes, especially for those NNEs studying English.

The participant’ early experiences in the Australian culture apparently impacted his identity and attitudes with regard to the language and its native-speakers, and their learning styles. In this regard, Ali believed the foundation of his characteristic attributes and language ability was built when he was a young learner at school. In this vein, too, Ali’s perspectives on ELT generally contribute to a visualization of ELT classroom practice as a response to the locally-situated needs of Saudi ELT scholars who also need to be acculturated into the natural context where the language is natively spoken in its natural context (Pu 2009). This suggests that the ELT profession is required to recognize and accommodate to a richer and more diverse vignette of a culturally loaded classroom life than the one drawn in artificial language curricula that do not cater to varied communicative and socio-cultural needs of EFL learners.

Another interesting finding is that irrespective of whether this scholar’s experiences with traditional teaching methods were positive or negative, this participant in our case study consciously and deliberately expressed a need to teach pragmatic, communicative and socio-cultural aspects of language together with language work. Therefore, there is a need to investigate the socio-cultural and educational contexts of the use

of new methods which advocate communicative competence as well. The research here contends that investigation of socio-cultural and educational contexts in which classroom teaching occurs is central to the understanding of local practices. This understanding will, in turn, contribute to correcting the limited view of ELT practices grounded in western conceptions of language teaching/learning practices. Therefore, more research of this kind is, in consequence, needed to enrich our collective understanding of the global practices of ELT in its many and varied local contexts.

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