

Cultural Identity and English Language Proficiency – Can They Co-exist?

Zhang Yushan*

Faculty of Education, Languages, Psychology and Music,
SEGi University, Malaysia
donna_zhang@126.com

Ng Soo Boon

Faculty of Education, Languages, Psychology and Music,
SEGi University, Malaysia
ngsooboan@segi.edu.my

Abstract

The UNESCO Sustainable Development Goals and Education 2030, which promotes global citizenship under the banner of high-quality education, provides a wealth of information about the significance of cultural identity. Although cultural identity has often been taken as a non-linguistic learning outcome affected by the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning process, it does influence the learner's language acquisition. An explanatory sequential mixed-method study was conducted in a Chinese university to explore the integration of cultural identity into university English courses, focusing on the impact of cultural identity on EFL learners' English language proficiency. Questionnaires were administered to 480 students, and in-depth interviews with 20 students were conducted. The study tested three types of EFL learners' bilingual cultural identity, with Productive Bilingual Identity being the primary cultural identity type chosen. The results show a significant positive correlation between EFL learners' cultural identity and their English language proficiency. In-depth interviews with students indicated that both English culture and local culture can strengthen the learning of English, contrary to the general belief that learning English is equated with adopting English culture. EFL teachers are suggested to add critical thinking activities and provide a suitable environment for cultivating students' Productive Bilingual Identity. Besides, EFL teachers are encouraged to recognise the importance of bilingual cultural identity and integrate cultural identity, especially Productive Bilingual Identity, into EFL courses to improve English language learning and enhance proficiency.

Keywords—Cultural identity; EFL learning; Language proficiency; Sustainable development; Globalisation; China

1. Introduction

Quality education is one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals spearheaded by UNESCO. Providing a good education is especially essential to developing countries, and to indicate its urgency, UNESCO has set 2030 as the target date to achieve this SDG 4. The SDG 4 Quality Education is better known as Education 2030. In the Education 2030 goals, global citizenship is being promoted. Being the global lingua-franca of the day, the English language is used and taught to many university students who will become global citizens. In the teaching process, EFL learners' language learning is influenced by many factors; this paper reports research conducted from the perspective of cultural identity, a factor whose importance is well

documented within the concept of global citizenship. Cultural identity is defined as an all-encompassing concept that covers multiple related identities, such as national identity, racial identity, ethnic identity, age identity, gender identity, socioeconomic or class identity, regional identity, language identity, political affiliation identity, and identity related to physical ability or disability (Chen & Lin, cited by Meihami & Salite, 2019). Cultural identity is believed to be not only ubiquitous but also indispensable in social science (Jia, 2019), especially in EFL teaching and learning fields.

1.1 Research Problem

In the field of EFL, cultural identity is usually taken as one of the non-linguistic learning outcomes affected by the language learning process. However, in language teaching and learning, a person's cultural identity can sometimes be the "cause" and affect how they learn the language. In Chinese school education, English is a required course for students, besides other essential subjects. With the background of globalisation, English language learning is no longer just a course like other subjects or the acquisition of knowledge and skills; it is related to socialisation and identity change. Hence, this study, conducted at a public university in China, tries to explore the types of cultural identity and its influence on EFL learners' English language proficiency, and recommendations for improving EFL learners' language learning from the cultural identity aspect are proposed.

1.2 Research Questions

Does learning a different language from one's mother tongue bring forth a change in cultural identity? This has been hotly debated in China. Through their years of education with English as a compulsory subject since primary school, there is a fear that Chinese cultural identity among students is subconsciously being eroded. Social phenomenon where the young have abandoned their cultural celebrations in favour of Western festivals attests to this fear. Despite many researchers conceiving cultural identity and language as crucial in EFL teaching and learning, there are still few empirical studies in this field. Hence, three research questions (RQ) are developed to fill in the research gaps:

RQ1: What are EFL learners' different cultural identity types towards Chinese and English cultures?

RQ2: What is the relationship between EFL learners' different cultural identity types and their English language proficiency?

RQ3: How to integrate cultural identities into EFL learners' English language learning?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Cultural Identity and English Language Proficiency

The word "identity" was first used in the field of psychology. Erikson, in his work on "identity crisis" and "self-identity" (1959), was the first person to use it in English language. He pointed out that identity is not only the process of psychological convergence of an individual but also of a group or a society. After years of development and research, scholars have reached a consensus that, through communication between members of a particular

community, the community's identity would be gradually constructed and reflected (Hecht, 1993; Ting-Toomy, 1999). In fact, Hamers and Blanc (2000) explained cultural identity formation at the entity level, where cultural identity was constituted after integrating cultural structure with one's personality. They insisted that cultural identity is a part of social identity and includes values, norms, languages, and institutions. Mantero (2007) related cultural identity to language acquisition after analysing the concept of cultural identity. Cultural identity and language acquisition diversity are based on analysing the teacher-student relationship, language infection, religion, and media. In their in-depth study on the relationship between cultural identity and language, Ho and Lin (2011) found that globalisation and localisation were closely related to cultural identity. Localisation is one of the solutions to the challenges faced by globalisation. It is speculated that the "invasion" of non-native languages threatens native languages and cultures, causing the erosion of loyalty towards one's national language and cultural identity. However, it is also a process of mutual influence. In a more recent year, Teng's (2019) research revealed that the learners' identities influenced their commitment to learning English and, in turn, were shaped by it too. Learners' cultural identity is complex and dynamic since it can be negotiated and developed over time. Elouali (2022) conducted research on cultural identity construction in language learning and found that cultural identity change was influenced by many factors, including language learning; meanwhile, it also confirmed that learning a new language influenced learners' identities, their thought patterns, and even their behaviour.

Since the term "cultural identity" was first introduced to China in 1993, this topic has aroused researchers' interest and gradually become popular among them. Liu (2000) researched from a cultural identity angle to figure out the influence language transmission received from culture. He thought that cultural identity is a sense of belonging and revealed its characteristics in a cultural group's language, behaviour, and thoughts. Chinese scholar Chen (2005) pointed out that cultural identity is the awareness of belonging to one cultural group. It can be cultural characteristics owned by a society or a mental mechanism that develops during an individual's childhood and keeps developing. With China's fast development and "English learning heat" all over the country, researchers have focused on cultural identity and English language learning. Even though, EFL learners value Chinese cultural identity more than English cultural identity, the English language and culture still have a significant impact on them (Chen, 2008; Ren, 2010).

Gao and Zhou (2008) emphasised the necessity and importance of doing an EFL learners' identity research in the EFL teaching field. The series of studies performed by Gao and her colleagues (Gao et al., 2011; Gao, 2013) found that the time invested in English learning is inversely proportional to the learners' cultural identity towards the Chinese language and culture. Gao (2013) argued that the more time invested in learning English, the weaker their Chinese cultural identity. At the same time, the higher the English language proficiency level, the more pronounced the subtractive bilingual cultural identity. Subtractive bilingual cultural identity means replacing native culture with foreign culture in the process of foreign language acquisition, which is one of the types of bilingual identity proposed by Lambert (1974). The research conducted by Gao (2013) discovered that English learning harmed Chinese EFL learners' acquisition of their native language and culture, and there is a phenomenon of substitution. However, with the continuous improvement of their English language level, learners will combine their communication style and value orientation in English and Chinese. The corresponding communication style and value orientation will be chosen to apply in

different situations. As a result, their subtractive bilingual cultural identity will gradually decrease, and their integration will gradually increase. Fan (2009), Shen and Wang (2014), Du (2015), and other academics all thought that English culture had a significant impact on college students. To deal with the resulting crisis of Chinese cultural identity, they analysed the reasons and put forward constructive suggestions based on their studies.

Bao (2016) proposed constructing an English corpus of Chinese culture to build Chinese students' cultural identity against the background of globalisation, and Qin and Li (2019) recommended reconstructing EFL learners' cultural identity to improve their EFL learning. Wang (2022) found that cultural identity has a significant positive impact on EFL learners' language proficiency, and multicultural campus activities and multicultural classes were suggested to be implemented, in order to promote English language proficiency from the perspective of cultural identity.

2.2 Social Psychological Model

In 1974, Canadian psychologist Lambert, who committed himself to studying language learning and cultural identity, creatively put forward the Social Psychological Model of Language Learning, which concerns foreign language learners' bilingual development and their bilingual identity change. The Model holds that foreign language learning will change learners' self-identity to a certain extent. It will produce "subtractive bilingualism" or "additional bilingualism". He believed that for learners at the intermediate level, their learning of a foreign language assists them in reaching and staying consistent with the target language members in terms of pronunciation and semantic structure. This language learning mode enables the learners to acquire the new language while maintaining recognition of their native language, which is an additive bilingual attitude. However, at the advanced stage of learning, learners tend to reach the learning outcome of subtractive bilingualism, and the more proficient they are in the other language, the more alienated they feel from their cultural groups. As a result, they feel chagrin and regret about the outcome, and a sense of fear will appear when they try to integrate into the new group. Compared to subtractive bilingualism, Lambert thought that additive bilingualism was preferable because it made the learners switch between their native and target languages as freely as possible.

Gao (1994) conducted qualitative research on 26 best foreign language learners, and she subsequently added "productive bilingualism" to Lambert's Social Psychological Model. This type of bilingualism emphasises the mutual reinforcement and promotion of both languages in the process of learning a foreign language. Under productive bilingualism, language learners' understanding of both languages and cultures complements each other. As a result, both languages promote and deepen each other, improving the learners' cognition, emotion, and action abilities. A productive bilingual identity is considered an ideal cultural identity to improve EFL learners' language development (Gao, 2001).

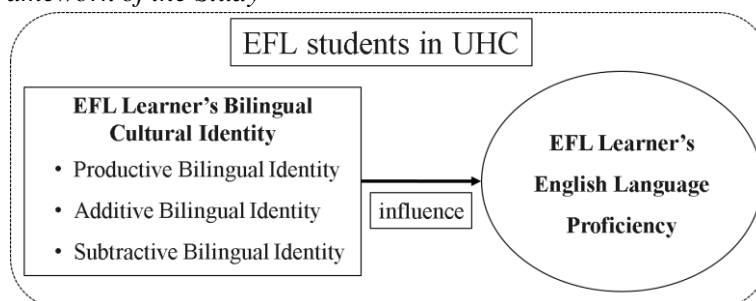
Both Lambert and Gao noticed that the language learning process is dynamic, and the bilingual identity has a reverse effect on language learning. In the EFL teaching and learning process, we also encountered the phenomenon that learners' different bilingual identities influenced their language learning. Hence, integrating cultural identity, especially productive bilingual identity, would elevate EFL learners' language proficiency.

2.3 Conceptual Framework of the Study

This study chose cultural identity as the independent variable and proficiency in a second language as the dependent variable. Researchers analyse cultural identity's influence on the EFL learner's English language proficiency and inquire from respondents to the study on how to improve the learners' proficiency by integrating cultural identity into EFL learning. The conceptual framework of this study is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of the Study



3. Research Methodology

This study used an explanatory sequential mixed methods design to find answers to the three RQs, where the quantitative phase came first, and the qualitative phase came later. The collection of quantitative data was done through a questionnaire to answer RQ1 and 2, while qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews to find answers to RQ3.

The selected research setting is a multi-discipline public university (referred to as UHC hereafter) located in the capital city of Hebei Province, northern China. This university offers EFL courses to Year 1 and 2 non-English major undergraduate students for 16 weeks every semester. The target population is about 3600 Year 2 non-English major students at UHC. Four hundred eighty students were selected as respondents to answer a questionnaire. These students were selected through cluster random sampling, and among them, 20 respondents were purposefully selected as interviewees for in-depth semi-structured interviews. The interview respondents were selected based on their types of bilingual cultural identity; as follow-up criteria, demographic factors including gender, hometown types, and discipline were considered.

The quantitative instrument used in this study was adapted from Gao's Bilingual Cultural Identity Questionnaire. The English Language Proficiency of the respondents was collected based on their English course scores in the previous semester. This score consists of 30% of the students' formative score and 70% of their final examination score. The formative score combines the student's performance for the whole semester, including English language listening and speaking ability. The final examination is held by the end of each semester in undergraduate students' first two years and focuses on students' English language reading and writing abilities. The total score contributed to the students' English language proficiency.

The three types of EFL learners' bilingual cultural identity were identified through a 14-questions, 5-point Likert scale questionnaire. Five items (Qs 2, 3, 4, 10, and 12) were created to measure the respondents' productive bilingual identity. Additive Bilingual Identity is

composed of four items, including Qs 1, 7, 8, and 13. Subtractive bilingual identity means it is tested through five items (Qs 5, 6, 9, 11, and 14). Quantitative data were analysed through Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software (Version 26). Cronbach's coefficient alpha for the whole questionnaire as well as each different type, is shown in Table 1. The reliability was found to be high.

Table 1

Description of Cultural Identity Types and Cronbach's α (N=480)

Items	Cronbach's α	Cultural Identity Types
Qs 2, 3,4,10,12	0.812	Productive Bilingual Identity
Qs 1, 7,8,13	0.658	Additive Bilingual Identity
Qs 5, 6,9,11,14	0.803	Subtractive Bilingual Identity
	0.791	Overall

On the other hand, the qualitative research tool is an interview protocol. 20 interviewees were asked how their cultural identity affected their learning of English as a foreign language.

Ethical consideration is vital in this study. Methods including obtaining permission from the questionnaire designer, signing consent forms, and guaranteeing the respondents' confidentiality were taken to protect the privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality of respondents and research data.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Cultural Identity Types

A descriptive statistical analysis of the quantitative data was done to investigate the different types of cultural identities of EFL learners in UHC. The results are shown in Table 2. Productive Bilingual Identity ranks first among the three cultural identity types, followed by Additive Bilingual Identity and Subtractive Bilingual Identity. Though the mean value of Productive Bilingual Identity is not significantly higher than the mid-value of 3 ($M=3.31$, $SD=0.74$), the ranking still shows that Productive Bilingual Identity is the primary cultural identity type chosen by the EFL learners in UHC, who prefer to treat the two languages as an integrated whole.

According to Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995), mean values between 3.5 and 5.0 are categorised as high level, 2.5 to 3.4 as medium level, and 1.0 to 2.4 as low level. The highest mean score among the three types of cultural identity is Productive Bilingual Identity ($M=3.31$, $SD=0.74$). Though it was categorised as medium level, it is still higher than the other two cultural identity types. The mean values of Additive Bilingual Identity ($M=2.72$, $SD=0.66$) and Subtractive Bilingual Identity ($M=1.91$, $SD=0.62$) indicate the respondents' relatively medium and low agreement levels with these two types of bilingual cultural identities. Based on the quantitative and qualitative results, most of the EFL learners involved in this study can see the difference between Chinese and English from a linguistic or cultural perspective. They prefer to treat their native language and English as an integrated whole so that the two languages can be positively reinforced during EFL learning. Some respondents accepted the coexistence of the two separate languages (Additive Bilingual Identity).

Meanwhile, only a few of them would replace their native language and culture with English language and culture (Subtractive Bilingual Identity).

Table 2

Descriptive Analysis of Cultural Identity Types (N=480)

Cultural Identity Types	Mean (M)	Std. Deviation (SD)
Productive Bilingual Identity	3.31	0.74
Additive Bilingual Identity	2.72	0.66
Subtractive Bilingual Identity	1.91	0.62

Note: scale:1=Completely disagree; 2=Disagree; 3=Partly agree; 4=Agree; 5=Completely agree

4.2 Relationship between Cultural Identity Types and English Language Proficiency

To investigate the second RQ, namely the relationship between EFL learners' cultural identity types and their English language proficiency, two directional hypotheses were formulated:

H₁: There is a significant positive correlation between EFL learners' cultural identity and their language proficiency.

H₂: There is a significant negative correlation between EFL learners' cultural identity and their language proficiency.

Parametric Pearson's correlation coefficient test was employed to test the hypotheses, and the result is shown in Table 3. The result indicates a statistically significant correlation between Cultural Identity and the respondents' English language proficiency ($r=.15$, $p<.01$, $r^2=.02$). The relationship is positive, but it could be more assertive. Hence, it can be concluded that H₁ is accepted and H₂ is rejected.

Table 3

Correlation Coefficient between Cultural Identity and English Language Proficiency (N=480)

	Language Proficiency		
	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)	r²
Cultural Identity	.15**	0.00	.02

** $p<.01$, two-tailed.

Table 4 reveals the relationship between the three cultural identity types and respondents' English language proficiency. The findings (Table 4) demonstrate a significant positive correlation between the respondents' Productive Bilingual Identity and English language proficiency ($r=.54$, $p<.01$, $r^2=.29$). Productive Bilingual Identity can explain 29% of the variance of the respondents' English language proficiency level, which is conceived as a significant effect size since it is greater than 0.25. However, a significant negative correlation between the respondents' Additive Bilingual Identity ($r=-.14$, $p<.01$, $r^2=.02$) and Subtractive

Bilingual Identity with their English language proficiency ($r=-.21$, $p<.01$, $r^2=.04$), implying that the respondents' English language proficiency level would decrease with the increase of these two bilingual cultural identities, explaining a minor percentage of the respondents' English language proficiency level variance (2% by Additive Bilingual Identity and 4% by Subtractive Bilingual Identity).

Table 4

Correlation Coefficient between Cultural Identity Types and English Language Proficiency (N=480)

Cultural Identity Types	Language Proficiency		
	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)	r^2
Productive Bilingual Identity	.54**	0.00	.29
Additive Bilingual Identity	-.14**	0.00	.02
Subtractive Bilingual Identity	-.21**	0.00	.04

** $p<.01$, two-tailed.

One thing worth our attention is that the respondents' Productive Bilingual Identity can explain up to 29% of their English language proficiency level variance. Therefore, cultivating learners' Productive Bilingual Identity would be an excellent way to improve their EFL learning.

4.3 Cultural Identity and English Language Learning

The third RQ, "How to integrate EFL learners' cultural identity into their English language learning?" can be answered from two aspects: the cultural identity's influence on English language proficiency and integrating cultural identity into language learning. Coding was done on the interview transcriptions, and the Nvivo software (version 12 plus) was utilised to assist the qualitative data analysis and management processes. Several themes concerning cultural identity's influence on English language proficiency and the integration of cultural identity into EFL learning emerged.

4.3.1 Influence of Cultural Identity on EFL Learning

Using Chinese Thinking in Writing

From the perspective of writing, the EFL learners were affected by their Chinese thinking while writing an English composition since they preferred to make a draft according to their Chinese thinking and then translate it into English. Many of the respondents tackled their writing this way.

Understanding Cultural Background of Passage is Essential

While doing reading comprehension practices, cultural knowledge became vital since a lack of it may lead to low achievement in EFL learning. An example of this thinking was that of interviewee 7, who mentioned her failure once in the interview: "If I understand the cultural background of the passage while doing a reading comprehension practice, I can find the right answer. If I don't know it, all the questions may be wrong."

Finding Similarities between Both Languages

For interviewees with Productive Bilingual Cultural Identity, they believed that searching for similarities between English and Chinese assisted in mutual improvement in both languages. Just as one of the interviewees said, “*I think there are similarities between the two languages. For example, some Chinese grammatical structures can be used as references, which makes it easier to learn English.*” (Interviewee 12) They can combine the two languages and reinforce each other in their learning process.

4.3.2 Integration of Cultural Identity into EFL Learning

Immersive Learning to Learn English Language (By Subtractive Bilingual Identity)

As for suggestions on integrating cultural identity into English language learning, interviewees with different bilingual cultural identity types expressed different opinions. Interviewees with Subtractive Bilingual Identity assumed that their English language learning would be improved through immersive learning, where the English mono-language environment is considered better for learning the language than the current bilingual or Chinese-dominated language environment.

Accumulation of Relevant Knowledge of Language and Culture (By Additive Bilingual Identity)

Additive Bilingual Identity holders recommended accumulating relevant knowledge about the English language and culture to broaden their horizons since they believe their English language proficiency would be levelled up after acquiring enough knowledge.

Compare, Integrate, and Reinforce Objectively (By Productive Bilingual Identity)

Productive Bilingual Identity holders recommended that critical thinking skills be taught in EFL courses by adding activities like translating and comparing Chinese culture so that the two languages can be better learned together and help each other out. This is a way of noticing the similarities between the two languages, for one thing, and enabling them to understand cultural diversity objectively for the other. As a result, their critical thinking “*can increase the depth of thinking in the process of learning...*”(Interviewee 9) and deepen their deliberation on learning and understanding the world. On the other hand, learners with Productive Bilingual Identity also suggested developing new lifestyles by taking advantage of the positive aspects of English culture in their lives to mould them into global citizens. Interviewee 6 said, “*I think we like English blockbusters, celebrating Christmas, going Dutch with friends, and so on, which have become a new lifestyle different from our elders’. I think it’s a good development for our lifestyle. It makes me more globalised.*” Those actions that were tagged as “Western” did not affect these EFL learners because, being Chinese people and learning the English language simultaneously, this state made them more confident to communicate with the world.

4.4 Discussion

Based on the above findings, three points are stated in this part. First, cultural identity, especially Productive Bilingual Identity, is positively related to EFL learners’ English language proficiency, and interviewees with Productive Bilingual Identity enjoy promoting both English and Chinese culture and languages. This differs from the previous research, in which Productive Bilingual Identity was not the preferred type among respondents (Gao et al., 2008; Liu and Gao, 2012; Yang, 2014; Zhang, 2015; Tang, 2021). After years of attending English courses under the Chinese Ministry of Education guidelines, EFL learners can

gradually develop an objective viewpoint towards the English language and their language acquisition. They can tell one language and culture from the other, and what's more, they are no longer putting two languages on contradictory sides; hence, the two languages assist each other in learning the other language. The EFL learners' critical thinking abilities have probably been elevated. As time changes and China as a country progresses and advances globally, China comes to a different level than it used to. The country's influence on the international stage has become more prominent, which brings confidence to the country and EFL learners in China. Besides, China is proposing cultural confidence to the whole nation, which leads the EFL learners to converge on their native culture and be willing to show their Chinese culture confidently to the world by using other languages.

Secondly, as the "cause", EFL learners' bilingual cultural identity does influence their English language proficiency, this is in consistency with previous research done by Dong (2018) and Yang (2022). As a result, conducting dual cultural education and fostering Productive Bilingual Identity in English language teaching would help EFL learners achieve better achievement in EFL learning.

Thirdly, global citizenship education can be implemented through EFL learning. Offering quality education and global citizenship education are effective methods and meet the targets of UNESCO Education 2030. To help the students get prepared for the challenges and opportunities of the era of globalisation, acquiring relative knowledge and skills is a necessity for the sustainable development of the whole world. EFL courses are relevant entry points for global citizenship education.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This study explores the types of cultural identity related to language acquisition in UHC as well as the correlation between EFL learners' bilingual cultural identity and their English language proficiency. Through the quantitative study with 480 respondents and the qualitative study with 20 interviewees, it can be concluded that, firstly, Productive Bilingual Identity, which helps EFL learners hold an objective view towards their language acquisition, ranks first among the three types of bilingual cultural identity, followed by Additive Bilingual Identity and Subtractive Bilingual Identity. Secondly, bilingual cultural identity positively relates to EFL learners' English language proficiency. Thirdly, the EFL learning context, including local culture and global citizenship concepts within the EFL course, will make EFL learning more contextual and meaningful.

The following implications can be drawn from the conclusions discussed above: Firstly, EFL teachers are recommended to make full use of EFL learners' preferred cultural identity type transition by trying to add more critical thinking activities to English courses and providing a suitable environment for cultivating students' Productive Bilingual Identity. Secondly, university EFL teachers are encouraged to realise the importance of bilingual cultural identity and are recommended to integrate cultural identity, especially Productive Bilingual identity, into EFL courses to improve the EFL learners' English language learning and consequently elevate their language proficiency. Thirdly, EFL courses are pertinent entry points for education in global citizenship since they offer relevant knowledge and skills for better

preparation for globalisation. As a result, creating a more meaningful learning context would assist EFL learners in coping with globalisation smoothly.

Even though a lot of time and work went into ensuring this empirical study was valid and reliable, it still has some flaws that can help with future research. The sample size is relatively small since it was conducted only at one university; the findings may need to be more generalisable to other universities with different characteristics from UHC. What's more, other factors influencing EFL learners' language proficiency should have been mentioned in this study, which can be explored in the future.

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