

Identity Construction Through Language Learning: SL Libyan Students' Perspectives of Second Language Identity

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بناء الهوية من خلال تعلم اللغة: وجهات نظر الطلبة الليبيين في الهوية اللغوية الثانية

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Abstract

The interrelationships between these terms language identity and cultural differences have become a major focus for many cultural researchers and social theorists. This study explores identity construction in second language acquisition (SLA) among Libyan students learning English. It examines how learning a second language leads to the development of new identities and how learners perceive themselves in relation to the target language culture. The research adopts a mixed-methods approach, utilizing a structured questionnaire with both closed-ended and open-ended questions to investigate the perspectives of 25 PhD students in Applied Linguistics at the Libyan Academy. The study draws upon existing literature on identity in SLA, including concepts of language variation, accommodation theory, and the acculturation model, to frame the analysis of the collected data. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the theoretical and practical implications of second language learning on the identity of Libyan students, enriching knowledge of SL identity through a systematic review of current studies related to identity construction through language learning.

Keywords: Language Identity, Second Language Learning, Cultural Integration, Linguistic Accommodation, Applied Linguistics.

المخلص

أصبحت العلاقات المتداخلة بين مفهومي الهوية اللغوية والاختلافات الثقافية محور تركيز رئيسي للعديد من الباحثين في الدراسات الثقافية والمنظرين الاجتماعيين. يستكشف هذا البحث عملية بناء الهوية في سياق اكتساب اللغة الثانية لدى الطلبة الليبيين المتعلمين للغة الإنجليزية. ويبحث في الكيفية التي يؤدي بها تعلم لغة ثانية إلى تطوير هويات جديدة، وكيف يدرك المتعلمون ذاتهم في علاقتها بثقافة اللغة المستهدفة. يعتمد البحث منهجاً مختلطاً، حيث يستخدم استبانة مُنظمة تجمع بين أسئلة مغلقة وأخرى مفتوحة، لاستقصاء آراء 25 طالب دكتوراه في تخصص اللسانيات التطبيقية بالأكاديمية الليبية. ويستند التحليل إلى الأدبيات السابقة حول الهوية في اكتساب اللغة الثانية، بما في ذلك مفاهيم تنوع اللغة، ونظرية التكيف اللغوي، ونموذج الاندماج الثقافي، من أجل تأطير تحليل البيانات المجمعة. تسهم النتائج في تعميق الفهم حول الآثار النظرية والتطبيقية لتعلم اللغة الثانية على هوية الطلبة الليبيين، كما تُثري المعرفة المتعلقة بالهوية اللغوية الثانية من خلال مراجعة منهجية للدراسات الحديثة حول بناء الهوية عبر تعلم اللغة.

الكلمات الدالة: الهوية اللغوية، تعلم اللغة الثانية، الاندماج الثقافي، التكيف اللغوي، اللسانيات التطبيقية.

Introduction

In the 1970s and 1980s, many researchers on language learning investigated learners' personalities, learning styles, motivations, and other unique features of SLA. Such research and interest coincided with humanist conceptions of the individual dominant in Western philosophy at that time. This evolution in conceptions of the individual, language, and learning in the social sciences have led to a significant change in theories of identity in the field of SLA.

This change includes a greater focus on sociological and anthropological dimensions of language learning, particularly with reference to sociocultural, poststructural, and critical theory (Norton & Toohey, 2001; Block, 2007b; Morgan, 2007). SLA researchers who are interested in identity are interested not only in linguistic input and output in SLA, rather in the correlation between the learning language and the larger social context in which it is thought. In other words, researchers have studied the diverse social, historical, and cultural contexts in which language learning takes place, and how learners negotiate their identities or might sometimes resist the diverse positions those contexts offer them. As Weedon (1997) notes, the central point is that the individual's "subjectivity," or what could be considered their "identity," is always constituted in relational terms; the individual never stands apart from the social world, but is always an integral and constitutive part of it.

1.1 Problem of study

Second language acquisition (SLA) encompasses more than just language learning; it is also a profound social and cultural journey that results in the embracing of new cultural norms, behaviors, and identities. This process is shaped by elements such as cultural assimilation, social power relations, and individual motivation. This research aims to explore the ways in which second language acquisition contributes to the development of a new identity.

1.2. Aims of the study

The study aims to identify how the learning a second language often leads to the construction of new identities and how the learners perceive themselves as foreign language learner, and determining the linguistic and cultural influence of the target language.

1.3. Significance of the study

The importance of study lies in two aspects; theoretical and Practical significance. Theoretically by enriching knowledge on of SL identity through systematic review of previous and current studies related to identity construction through language learning. Practically, it identifies the influence of learning a second language on (Libyan) students.

2. Literature Review:

2.1. Definition of identity

The meaning of "identity" as we currently use it is not well defined by dictionary definitions, which reflect older senses of the word. Despite everyone knows how to use the word properly in everyday discourse, it is more complicated, it proves quite difficult to give a general or unified concept of "identity" that captures the range of its all-current meanings. Thus, "identity" in its present incarnation is mainly reflects a social sense, but it can vary based on science and disciplines have taken an intense interest in questions concerning identity. In political science, for example, the concept of "identity" is considered as the center of debates.

According to Hogg and Abrams (1988), identity is what people think who they are, of what kind of people they are, and how their relation to others. Deng (1995) defined identity as the way individuals and groups define themselves and are defined by others on the basis of religion, race, ethnicity, language, and culture. Based on Jenkins's definition (1996), identity refers to the ways in which individuals and groups are distinguished in their social relations with other individuals and groups. Another definition presented by Bloom, "National identity describes that condition in which a mass of people have made the same identification with national symbols – have internalised the symbols of the nation" (Bloom 1990, 52). Wendt (1992), defines identity as people's specific understandings and expectations about self.

Deeper concept of identity presented by Taylor, "My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose" (Taylor 1989, 27). Wendt (1994) also defines identity as the ability of determining 'who I am/we are in situations and positions in terms of social roles. Finally, identity as Berger sees, "a coherent identity incorporates within itself all the various internalized roles and attitudes." (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 132).

2.2. Diachrony of Identity in SLA

For many years, researchers of second language acquisition have been interested in the relationship between learning language and learner's identity and how might a second language influence or change personality of learner. This interest is not only in linguistic input and output in SLA, but in the relationship between the language learner and the larger social world. In particular, these researchers have examined the diverse social, historical,

and cultural contexts in which language learning is used and how learners negotiate or perhaps resist those contexts offer them. Moreover, a lot of researchers interested in this particular field are also interested in to what extent classrooms and communities promote or constrain the process of second language identity construction. They mainly interest in articulation of identity, and resistance is expressed in and through language. Thus language is more than a system of symbols, words, and grammatical rules, it is a social practice and communication system in which experiences are organized and identities negotiated. In the 1970s and 1980s, much research on language learning investigated the impact of second or learning language on personalities, learning styles, motivations, and other traits of individual learners. Such research was consistent with rising beliefs and conceptions of the individualism in Western philosophy at that time, which presupposed that every person had an unique, fixed, and independent core. As a result, there is now a wealth of research that explores the relationship between identity and language learning, issues of identity is now central to theories of language learning and teaching. According to (Gee, 1996), second language acquisition and practice entail not only the acquisition of new linguistic skills and conventions but also acceptable ways of using languages and of behaving, valuing, and thinking to be a successful member of the new discourse community.

(Davidson, 1996; McKay & Wong, 1996; Norton, 2000, 2010, 2017; Norton Pierce, 1995), all assumed that not only ESL learners physically exposed to the new cultural and linguistic community but also EFL learners gradually learning new cultural and linguistic norms experience a process of identity negotiation, and transformation throughout their language learning journey. Key books of the same interest include Norton (2000), Toohey (2000), Pavlenko and Blackledge (2003), and Block (2007a). Many scholars such as (Ricento, 2005; Zuengler & Miller, 2006; Block, 2007a; Swain & Deters, 2007; Menard-Warwick, 2009) cite Norton's theorizing of identity (Norton Peirce, 1995; Norton, 2000) as a reference to framing understanding of identity and language learning. Furthermore, poststructuralist theory, particularly that associated with Weedon (1997) and Bourdieu (1991), is essential to Norton's theories of identity in learning language, which she suggests as an area of struggle, and subject to change. Besides identity issues, Norton assumed motivation "investment," as a basic component in SLA, which is inspired by the work of Bourdieu (1991), pointing to the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language and their desire to learn and practice it.

However, studying identity in SLA recently took another dimensions. For example, negotiating identity tensions in multilingual learning. According to Wang et.al (2021), when learners' unique orientations to language and language acquisition clash with ideological discourses surrounding languages, multilingual learning may cause identity issues for the learners. By changing how they view and interact with languages, learners then try to ease the tensions. To capture the relationship between learners' impressions of the ideological discourses surrounding the languages they study and their own personal incentives to acquire the language, we use the term "orientation" in the research that follows.

Similarly, Santos(2021), confirms that during language learning process, individuals influence by the surrounding environment, especially family heritage and sense of belonging that are significantly associated with the learners' language learning decision-making processes and motivations. according to H. Douglas Brown, "cultural identity shifts through the lenses of seven cultural parameters; these include dynamic relationships between language learning and learners' reexamination of their cultural traits when faced with the values of the target language's culture." It means that studying English abroad is more than just a language exercise to enhance one's quality of life; it also raises concerns about the learner's potential to absorb the cultural norms of their new surroundings.

2.3. Identity Construction through Language Learning

Language Variation

The term variation refers to social, regional, or contextual differences in the ways that people use a particular language. According to Meyerhoff (2006), language variation occurs when the speaker is willing to emphasize similarity the interlocutors as a form of rapprochement to them. Language variety is totally associated with speaker's motivation where they represent themselves differently or to conform the values or norms of certain language variant of a particular group or community. Thus, this variation is occurred as a result of speakers' effort wither to identify a certain social identity (for example, when a language learner attempts to approach their target language group) or might to show a distinction from others. Variation style becomes more highlighted when it comes to studying identity. For instance, Heller (1982) in a study pointed that as a French clerk working in an English hospital used his French accent to call for a French patient called 'Robert Saint Pierre' in French style. The English employer angrily corrected the clerk by pronouncing the name in an English style claiming that the work is in an English hospital. Briefly, the relationship between language variation style and identity involve a complex mix of intrapersonal, interpersonal, social, and political issues which associated to people' belongings. In the same point, Stockwell (2002) pointed that 'within sociolinguistic studies, style refers to the variation within registers that can represent individual choices along social dimension.' One stylistic dimension within a register

would be the scale from formality- casualness , or might include monologicdialogic , impersonal-intimate, formulaic-creative styles, or other manifestations of self-expression.

Accommodation Theory

Not far from Meyerhoff, Giles, Coupland, and Coupland (1991), believes that speakers adjust their speech styles to accommodate their addressees either to converge or to diverge based on social motivation of the speaker. According to Gils, during communication, people tend to change their communication style either to become more or less similar to the interlocutors. This might result in convergence by being alike or closer to the person they speak with, or divergence when move further apart and exhibit their difference.

However, accommodation theory has been evolved into an “interdisciplinary model of identity processes in communicative interaction” (N. Coupland & Jaworski, 1997, pp. 241–242). Although language is still a central focus of the theory, another aspects or ways of expressing identity during communication(e.g., dress and hair styles, cosmetics) have been considered as a part of CAT.

Stamp et al., (2015), confirms that CAT was originally framed as an interpersonal theory of speech nonverbal alignments, but it now includes intergroup processes as well for comparison with other perspectives and theories of interactive alignment, synchrony, conversational entrainment.

Rasenberg et al. (2020) adds a description of CAT’s evolution at this, the theory’s 50th year, is a core of studying identity in SLA that attempts to understand why, how and when speakers adjust their communication styles.

The Acculturation Model

According to Bostean & Gillespie, (2018) Acculturation theory provides a robust framework for exploring and studying the process of acculturation to the target language based on social and psychological variables, focusing on the various strategies individuals might use, such as assimilation, integration, marginalization, and separation, each with potential implications for psychological well-being. According to Schumann(1986), the integration of the language learner into the target language community is guided by social and psychological factors. Language acquisition is influenced by the learner's degree of acculturation, to which second language learner acculturates themselves towards the culture of the target language. This adaption of language by a learner is happened to fit an existing linguistic framework. Based on this theory, social distance refers to the willingness of learner to identify themselves to the target language members. While psychological distance concerns with the feeling of comfort that the learner experiences when learning a second language. This factor particularly is influenced by motivation, attitude and culture shock. Finally, we can say it is a process of adaption a new culture that involves a new formation of identity and a new orientation.

Based on Schumann’s model encompasses two types of acculturation. In the first type, the learner socially integrate while contact with L2 speakers who provide him with sufficient input with retaining his native culture; this is similar to Berry’s (as cited in Culhane, 2004) integration strategy. On the other hand, in type 2 of acculturation, the learner develops social contact with the target language group and also adopt aspects of the target culture such as lifestyle and values ; this corresponds to Berry’s (as cited in Culhane, 2004) assimilation strategy. By exhibiting both types of acculturation, the model implies that a learner could successfully acquire the target language regardless of whether he or she chose to adopt the target culture or not (Bluestone, 2009).

The Gap of the study

There is an absence of dedicated and focused studies on the Libyan context that examine the phenomenon of second language identity for Libyan language learners specifically and how this identity is formed during their learning of a second language (English). Furthermore, there is a paucity of research in this area that integrate theoretical models related to identity construction (Accommodation theory and Acculturation model) and data collected from English language students in Libya. In addition, there is a lack of studies that use mixed methodologies that combine closed and open questions, which allow for a deeper understanding of learners' attitudes about their second identity and their cultural perceptions of the target language.

Scientific Contribution

- Enriching knowledge and providing a deeper understanding of the impact of English language learning on Libyan learners' identity construction, particularly at the graduate level and in the field of applied linguistics.
- Presenting an analytical model that combines social and linguistic theories to understand the formation and construction of second language identity in an Arab-African cultural context.
- Providing research results that may help develop educational policies and curricula that take into account the specific cultural and linguistic identity of Libyan learners.

3. Methodology

This study employs a descriptive research design, which is commonly used to investigate and interpret phenomena in their natural settings, resulting in a better understanding of participants' perspectives. A mixed-method approach was used, which combined quantitative and qualitative methods to ensure an in-depth investigation of identity as sociocultural construct in second language. A structured questionnaire was created with a majority of closed-ended questions (multiple-choice) to allow for statistical analysis, as well as open-ended questions to collect qualitative insights.

3.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 25 PhD students from the Department of English who are specialized in Applied Linguistics at the Libyan Academy/Janzour. The participants were from both sexes and at different stages of their doctoral studies. Initially, 20 students were invited to participate; however, 25 responded, resulting in a response rate of approximately 93%, ensuring a reliable and representative sample for the study's objectives.

Limits of the study

- The study is limited to PhD students specialized in Applied Linguistics at the Libyan Academy/Janzour which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other academic levels and specializations.
- It focuses particularly on English as a second language without considering other languages.
- The study is conducted specifically in a socio-cultural Libyan context which may influence the applicability of the study's findings in other contexts.

3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected using a structured survey created with Google Forms, which ensured anonymity, accessibility, and ease of response. The survey was distributed using Whatsapp, a popular communication platform among the target group. The survey instrument was carefully designed to elicit participants' perceptions towards identity in second language acquisition.

3.4. Data Analysis

The study used Google Sheets for data analysis, identifying trends and patterns. Descriptive statistics were used to identify patterns. This comprehensive analysis provided a strategic understanding of SL identity.

4. Results and discussion

The survey of PhD students explored their experiences and insights of identity construction through language learning as English language learners.

4.1. Analysis and results

Personal information:

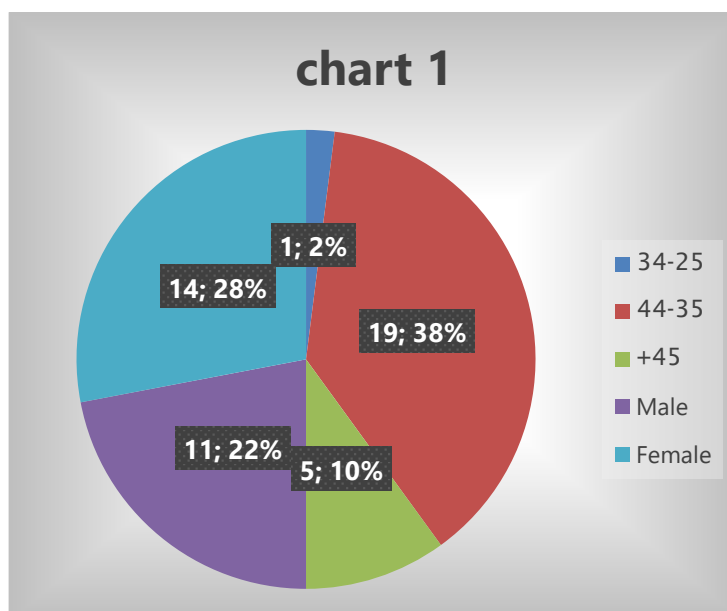


Figure 1. Personal Information.

The demographic data indicates that most respondents are aged 35-44, with a higher representation of females. This suggests that middle-aged individuals, particularly women, are more actively engaged in learning a second language.

- **Proficiency Level in Your Second Language:**

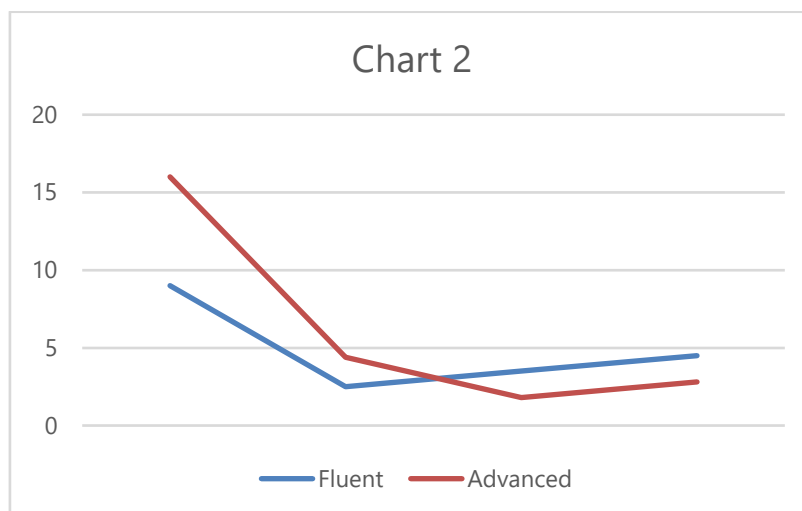


Figure 2. Proficiency Level in Your Second Language.

The chart (2) indicates that 16 of the participants have advanced level of proficiency in their second language.

- **Impact of Language Learning on Identity:**

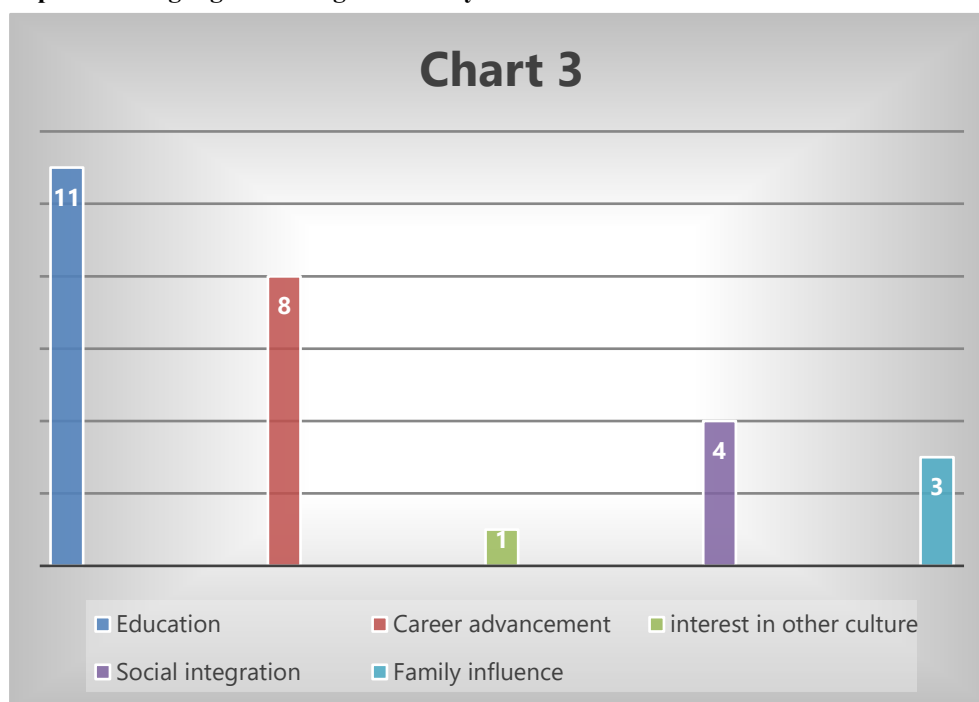


Figure 3. Impact of Language Learning on Identity.

What motivated you to learn a second language?

The chart shows that learning a second language is primarily driven by the clear benefits of education and career advancement, with family influence and social integration also playing significant roles.

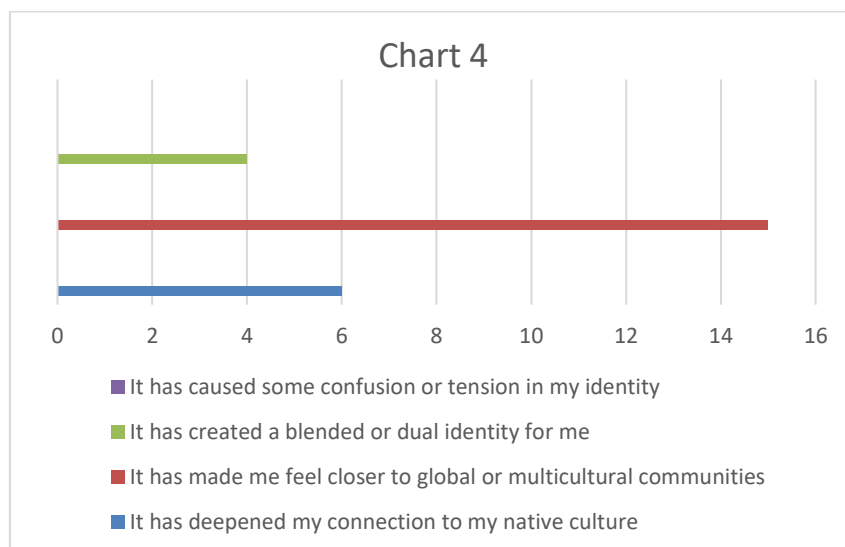


Figure 4. What motivated you to learn a second language?

How has learning a second language affected your sense of identity?

Many respondents (15 out of 25) confidently stated that learning a second language has helped them feel a stronger connection to a global or multicultural identity. Furthermore, some respondents (6 out of 25) assert that this experience has greatly deepened their ties to their native culture. Additionally, a smaller group (4 out of 25) indicated that it has successfully created a blended identity that merges elements from both their native culture and that of the second language.

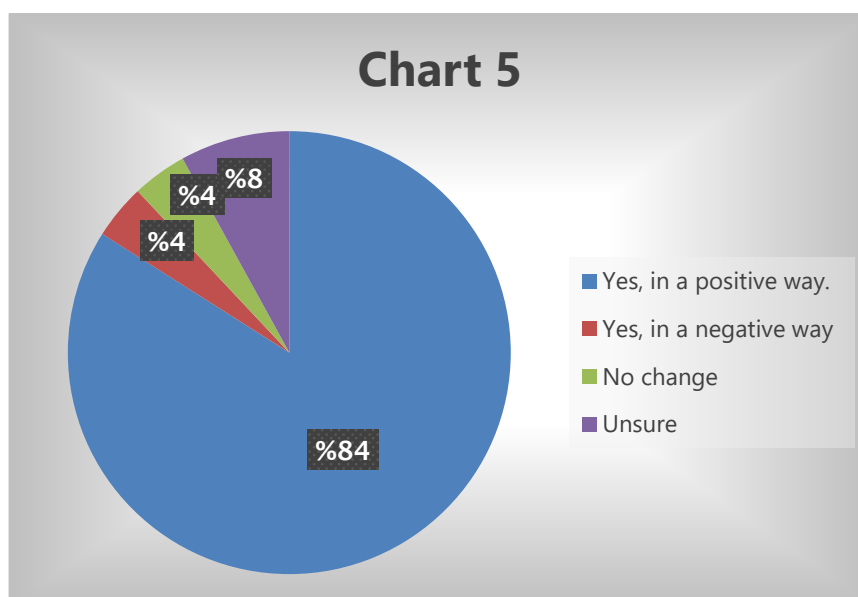


Figure 5. How has learning a second language affected your sense of identity?

• Do you think learning a second language has changed how others view you?

The chart (4) indicates that 84% of participants believe that learning a second language has positively changed how others view them while 8% of respondents are unsure about it; in addition, 4% of participants believe that learning a second language has negatively changed how others view them and the same as for the choice no change.

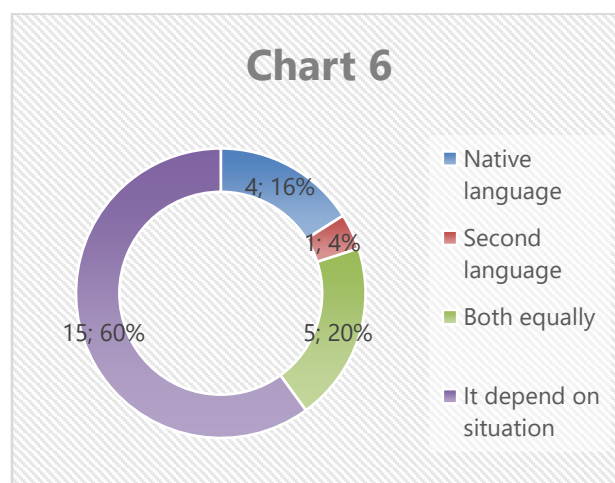


Figure 6. Do you think learning a second language has changed how others view you?

- **Do you feel more comfortable expressing yourself in your native language or your second language?**

Chart (5) reveals that 60% of respondents feel more comfortable in expressing themselves depending on the situation while 20% feel more comfortable in both native and second language. 16% of them feel comfortable in using their native language;also,4% of respondents are relaxed with the second language.

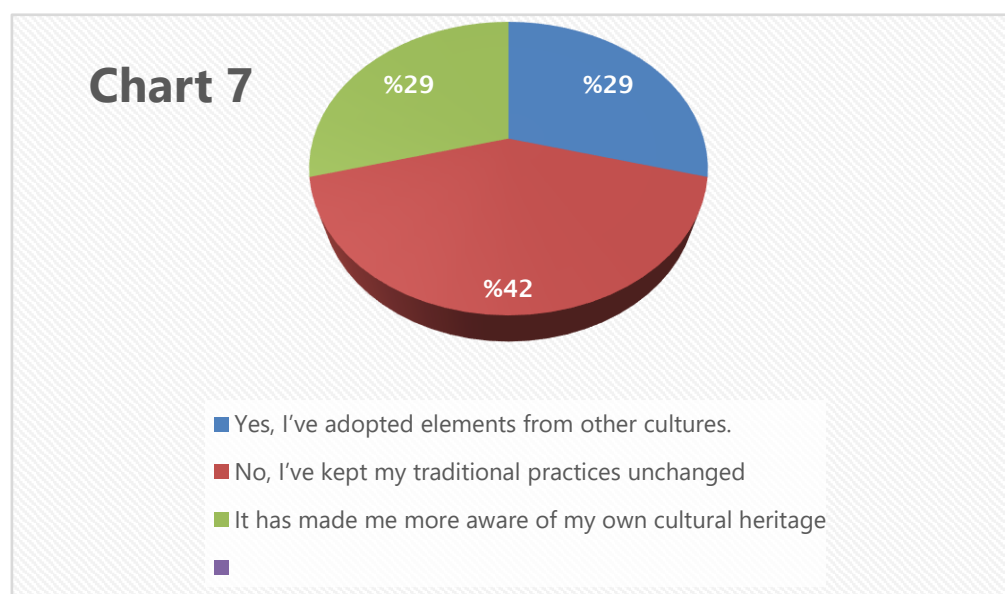


Figure 7. Do you feel more comfortable expressing yourself in your native language or your second language?

- **Has learning a second language influenced your cultural traditions or practices?**

While 29% have adopted elements from other cultures, the same percentage have become more aware of their own cultural heritage. Additionally, 42% of respondents have maintained their traditional practices, indicating varied impacts on cultural traditions.

- **Language Use, Social Integration, and Cultural Identity:**

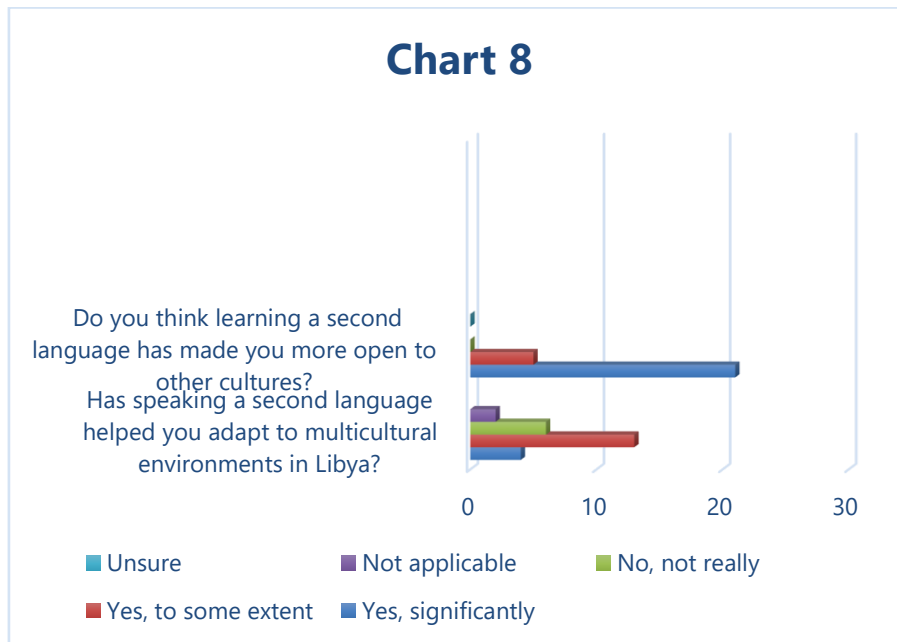


Figure 8. Has speaking a second language helped you adapt to multicultural environments in Libya?

- Has speaking a second language helped you adapt to multicultural environments in Libya?**

The chart (6) clearly demonstrates that a significant number of respondents answered "Yes, to some extent," while a smaller group indicated "Yes, significantly." Additionally, the percentages for "Unsure," "Not applicable," and "No, not really" are quite minimal.

- Do you think learning a second language has made you more open to other cultures?**

The chart (6) the majority of respondents believe that learning a second language significantly increases their openness to other cultures. A smaller number of respondents answered "Yes, to some extent." In addition, very few people responded with "No, not really," or "Unsure."

Have you faced any challenges or prejudice because of speaking a second language in Libya and do you believe that learning a second language is important for maintaining cultural identity in a diverse society like Libya?

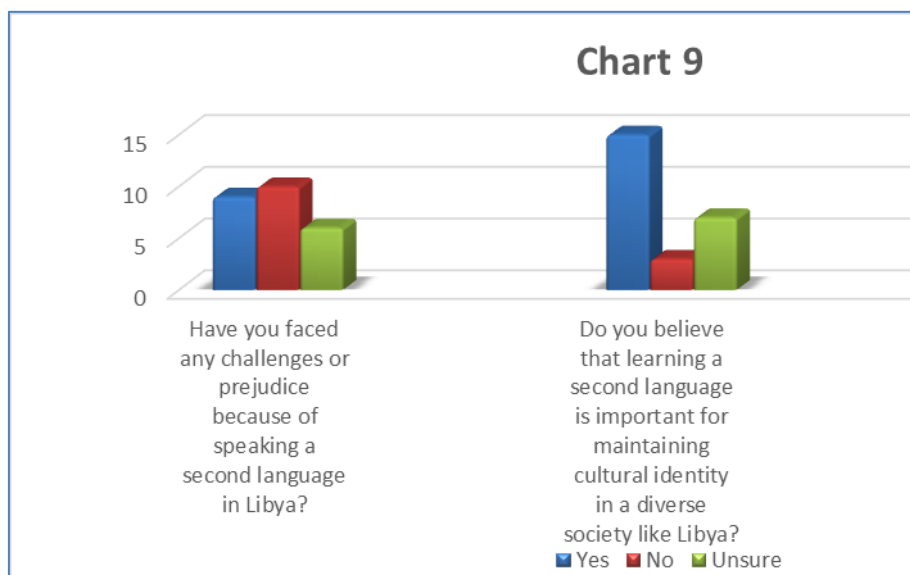


Figure 9. Do you think learning a second language has made you more open to other cultures?

The chart indicates that when respondents were asked whether they had faced challenges or prejudice due to speaking a second language, the number of "Yes" and "No" answers were fairly close, with a significant number also choosing "Unsure." Conversely, when asked about the importance of learning a second language for maintaining cultural identity in Libya, a much larger proportion of respondents answered "Yes." This suggests a strong belief in the value of multilingualism for cultural preservation. Fewer respondents answered "No," while a moderate number remained "Unsure."

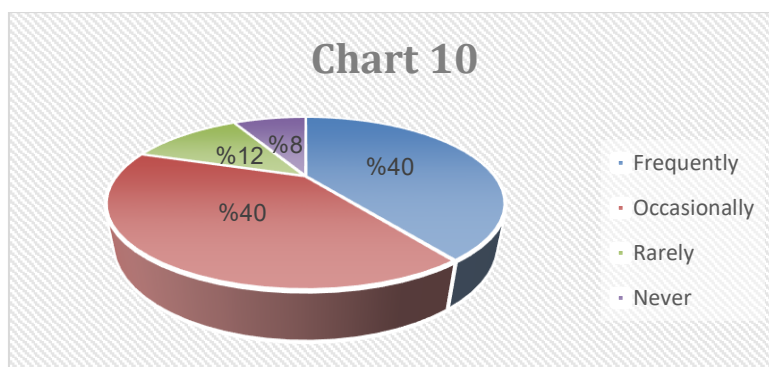


Figure 10. Has learning a second language influenced your cultural traditions or practices?

- **How often do you use your second language in everyday life in Libya?**

The pie chart(8) indicates that 40% of respondents use the second language frequently or occasionally in everyday life; on the other hand, 12% of respondents have used it rarely and 8% of them never use the second language in daily life.

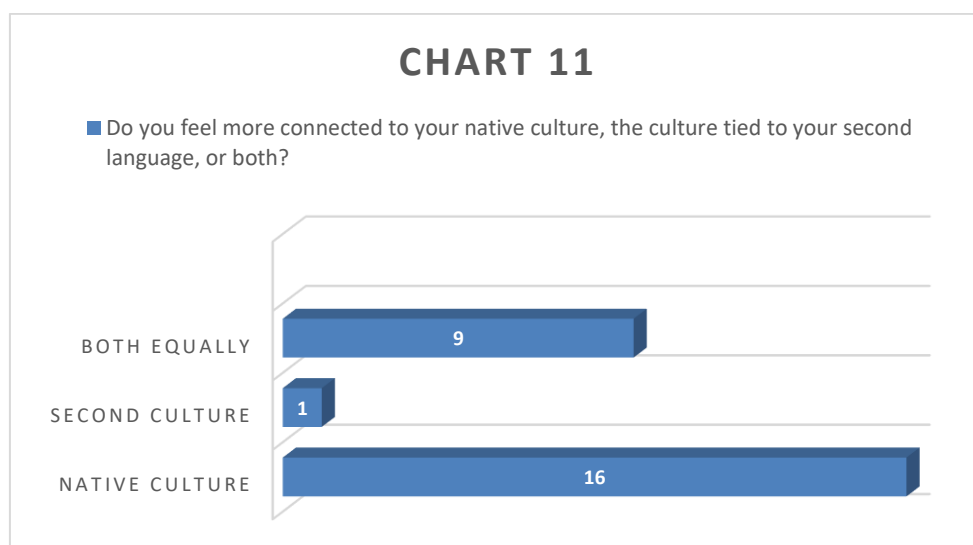


Figure 11. How often do you use your second language in everyday life in Libya?

- **Do you feel more connected to your native culture, the culture tied to your second language, or both?**

The majority of respondents clearly express a stronger connection to their native culture, with some also demonstrating equal ties to both their native and second language cultures.

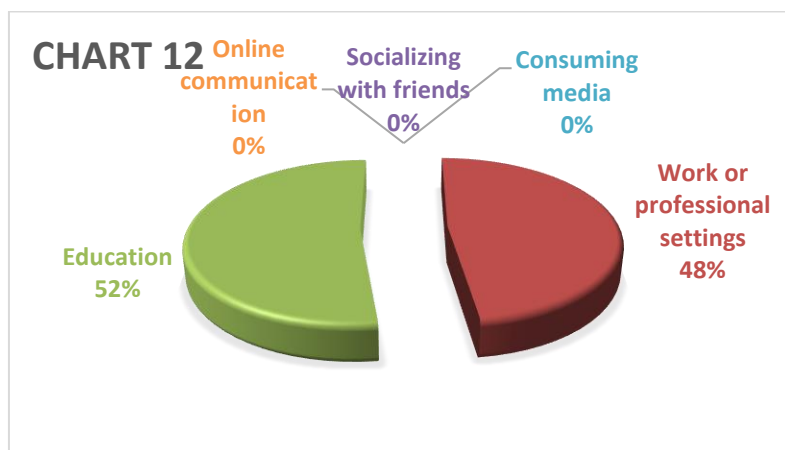


Figure 12. Do you feel more connected to your native culture, the culture tied to your second language, or both?

- **In which situations do you use your second language?**

The pie chart(9) illustrates the distribution of activities. Education is the largest part, making up 52% of the total. Work or professional activities follow closely behind at 48%. Socializing with friends, consuming media, and online communication appear to be absent from the data, each representing 0% of the distribution.

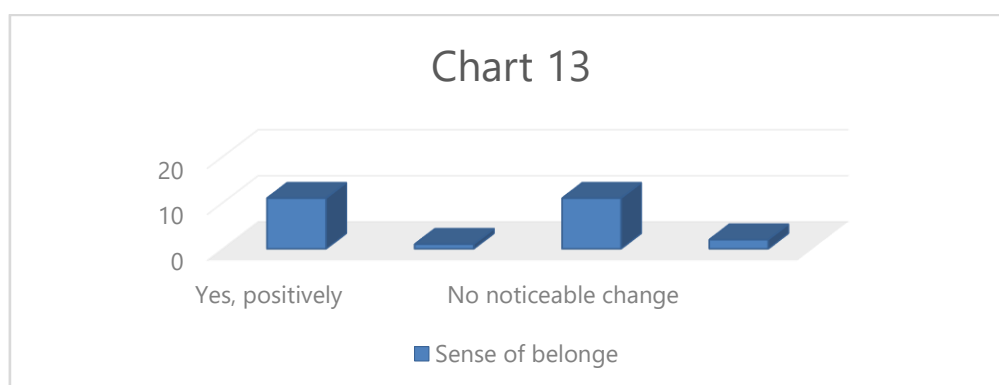


Figure 13. In which situations do you use your second language?

- **Has learning a second language influenced your sense of belonging within Libyan society?**

The chart indicates that learning a second language has significantly enhanced the sense of belonging for many within Libyan society. While some individuals report no noticeable change, a select few have experienced a negative impact on their sense of belonging.

4.2. Analysis of responses to open-question:

The responses regarding language and identity reveal a complex and multifaceted relationship between learning English and personal identity. Many respondents express that learning English positively influences their sense of self by connecting them to global cultures and communities. This connection ultimately broadens their perspectives and makes them more open-minded and analytical. Exposure to diverse linguistic and cultural groups enhances their feeling of interconnectedness with the world.

Additionally, when communicating in a second language, individuals often adjust their styles to align with cultural norms, which can affect their tone, expressions, and confidence. Some participants noted that they feel more reserved or formal when speaking English compared to their native language, suggesting that using multiple languages can involve different mindsets. Moreover, many find it easier to discuss academic or professional topics in English, as these subjects are typically learned and practiced in that language. Sensitive topics, such as politics, may also be addressed more comfortably in a second language, allowing for a degree of objectivity or distance. Overall, the insights demonstrate how learning and using a second language can broaden perspectives, influence communication styles, and provide a framework for discussing various topics with greater ease or sensitivity.

5. Discussion and Findings:

This study investigates how learning a second language influences identity, cultural absorption, and societal views in Libya. It zeroes in on female individuals between 35 and 44 years of age who understand a second language effectively. Education and professional aims prompt language study as per the research findings. But learning a second language has the power to modify personal identity too. It allows women to interact with other cultures around the globe and sometimes gets them to keep their own culture. Participants note that individuals view them more positively because of their ability to speak, although the levels of comfort they feel to talk vary. Some women learn aspects of the other culture, but many end up being more connected to their own heritage. The report indicates that individuals who are able to speak more than one language become more tolerant of other cultures and feel more integrated into Libyan society, even though some might still be prejudiced. In conclusion, this report confirms that second-language acquisition plays a very important role in promoting understanding between cultures and developing a more open society in Libya. The figures clearly indicate that learning of a second language exerts a critical impact on the members of Libyan society, radically shaping their identity, cultural awareness, and integration into society. While educational and career advancement stand as the major motivating factors for learning a language, the benefits go far beyond such pragmatic concerns. The majority of the interviewees express a clearer sense of membership to a global or multicultural identity, openness towards other cultures, and membership in Libyan society.

Besides, the study exemplifies the subtlety in coping with multilingualism. Though some have challenges in meeting difficulties and being discriminated against, and expressing various levels of comfort in their second language, Nevertheless, the findings are used to reinforce strongly the central role that multilingualism has in creating intercultural understanding and constructing a more tolerant and integrated society. The challenges have to be addressed and linguistic diversity has to be valued and respected in the Libyan context.

6. Recommendations

1. Establish programs to promote cultural exchange and understanding among TL learners. This might encompass multicultural festivals, language clubs, events that promote cultures exchange.

1. Providing more opportunities for global contact and communication with target language group or native speakers, while maintaining native culture.

2. Encouraging intercultural and across- cultural communication among SL speakers which helps to form learner's identity.

3. Asserting the need for inclusive language policies that respect construction of language identity, alongside promoting proficiency in global languages.

4. Conduct further research for deeper understanding of second language identity construction and to assess the long-term effects of SLL on identity, cultural integration, and social perceptions. This is beneficial to improving policies and programs for multicultural learners.

7. Conclusion

In 1997, Firth and Wagner argued persuasively that the field of SLA needed to expand its empirical presume in order to become more theoretically firm and strong. This thriving in research in identity and SLA manifests evidently that language acquisition is not only a complex cognitive process, but also a very deeply social practice. Research on second language identity in the field of applied linguistics has opened up more opportunities for research on every aspect of SLA process in particular and in the field generally. While this paper has focused on the identity of the second language learner, there is now increasing interest in the identity of the second language teacher (Johnston, 2002; Lin, 2004), the second language teacher educator (Goldstein, 2003; Pennycook, 2004), and the second language researcher (Hawkins, 2004; Leung et al., 2004) as well. It is very clear that the interest in second language identity will vigorously grow, enriching current research and opening up the path for new and exciting directions.

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