Globalization, English, and Identity Construction:
A Narrative Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

Language is fundamental in shaping one's identity. In today's borderless world, how we see, define and position ourselves appear to be, to a varying degree, interconnected to a host of 'globalizing forces', such as English. Drawing on Bhabha's (1994) notion of hybridity and Gomzina's (2012) multi-layered cultural identity as theoretical frameworks, this study aims to trace and understand how the exposure to the English language has impacted one of the writers' sense of self as an individual. Adopting an autobiographical narrative inquiry, the study used personal narratives written by Luthfiah as data. These narratives encompassed her reflections of various 'significant moments' that highlighted her engagement with English. Analysis of the narratives pointed to three major themes: (1) being fascinated with English, (2) feeling superior because of English, and (3) expanding the self through English. While initially Luthfiah's exposure to English had led her to a state of ambivalence regarding her identity, it is *through* English that she was finally able to expand herself and to understand her hybrid identity: English has become a tool for Luthfiah to re-define herself as an Indonesian. This study confirms the idea that there is no one single true way of defining one's cultural identity, as identity is multifaceted and complex and that it is always in the process of 'becoming'.

Keywords: Cultural identity, English, hybridity, narrative inquiry

1. INTRODUCTION

As the world is 'shrinking' due to globalization, almost everyone nowadays seems to have been exposed to the English language. The spread of English, indeed, has often been perceived as an inevitable part of globalization (Niño-Murcia, 2003; Pennycook, 2013), which manifests itself in the wide-ranging use of the language in many different contexts.

As a medium of communication, English cannot be seen as neutral. As language and culture are intricately intertwined, being exposed to the English language, consequently, also means being exposed to certain cultural values and perspectives (Lin, 2014). While encountering different ways of seeing the world can expand one's horizons, it, however, can also spark tensions within individuals and may lead to a 'crisis of identity' (Hall, 1996). Knowing 'who we are' then becomes crucial in engaging with 'otherness' so that identity crisis can be avoided.

There has been a number of research studies that explore the connection between language and identity within and outside educational settings (see Hamid & Jahan, 2015; Kajee, 2015; Leigh, 2019, Liu & Xu, 2011; Torres-Olave, 2011; Zacchi, 2010); however, research that employs autobiographical narrative inquiry in the area is still scant.

Having been exposed to the English language as we both crossed the national borders at an early age, we have gradually developed a great interest in inquiring into the language-culture nexus and in understanding how language learning can affect our identities. This paper focuses on the journey of Luthfiah, an Indonesian university student who had the opportunity of crossing national borders and lived in Qatar when she was eleven, in knowing English and how she sees the language to have impacted her sense of self as an Indonesian.

1.1. Globalization and the Spread of the English Language

Globalization is often considered as "the compression of the world as a whole" (Robertson, 1992, p. 8), which have led to the interconnections and flows

among nations involving the multifarious dimensions of life. In relation to linguistic aspect, globalization has frequently been attached to the English language, giving rise to the notion of English as an international language (Pennycook, 2013). It follows that, in today's world, the acquisition of English has been widely believed as a powerful tool to enhance one's 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1991), enabling not only personal development but also professional and socio-economic growth that open up better job opportunities and social mobility (Malik & Mohamed, 2014). English language proficiency has, consequently, become a commodity in this globalized era. However, as Lin (2014) argues, when people use a particular language to communicate to other people, it is not only linguistic forms that 'flows' but also values and ideologies that are encoded, constituted, and embedded in the language, which can thus affect one's sense of identity.

1.2. Identity and Its Multiplicity

Identity is a complex and multi-dimensional concept; it involves "the individual, social, cultural, and political aspects of life, embracing plurality of terms and meanings" (Gandana, 2008, p. 5). As Gomzina (2012) maintains, the visible aspects of identity show only a part of the self and to delve into one's identity work can take a very long time. Further, due to its complexity, one's identity can never be precisely defined. This idea resonates with Hall's (1996) theorization of the postmodern identity that is perceived as ever-changing, fluid, multiple and always in the process of 'becoming'.

Postmodern theorists and researchers thus have progressed past the view of identity as singular and monolithic. In Gomzina's (2012) conception, the plurality of one's identity is perceived as being multi-layered, hence the term 'multi-layered cultural identity' (MCI), as shown in Figure 1. According to Gomzina, one's identity is constructed based on two opposing forces: static and fluid entities.
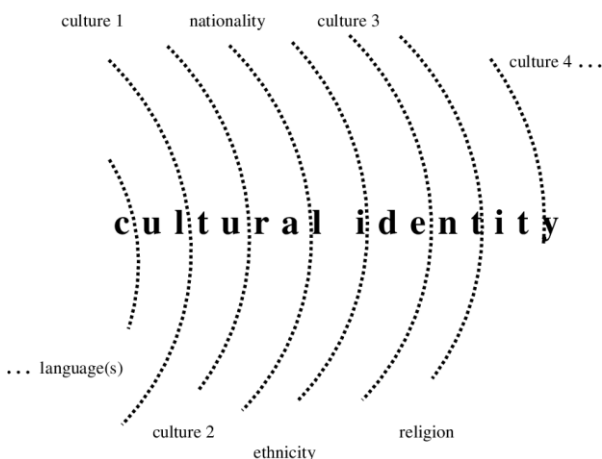

Figure 1 Gomzina's *(2012) concept of multilayered cultural identity*

In her theorization, individuals are seen as having a 'core'—the static element—while everything else around this core is dynamic and constantly evolving, depending on the contexts they are in. These contexts, in turn, can provide individuals with renewed interpretations of life as they interact with other people, thus dynamically and continuously reshaping their understandings of the world.

Gomzina highlights the idea that there are multifarious elements that make up the 'self'—the essence of being. Her conceptualization of identity implies that there is no single 'right way' to define one's identity. Rather, it can be defined and interpreted in so many different ways.

1.3. Hybrid Identities and the Occupation of the 'Third Space'

Hybridity is a term that is regarded to be closely associated with the notion of cultural identity. While the term, in its simplest definition, means 'mixture', in postcolonial studies it is commonly used to refer to the creation of new cultural forms as a product of colonization (Bhabha, 1994). In today's world, new cultural forms are constantly emerging, not so much because of colonization, but rather because of globalization (Smith, 2008). As Smith contends, the ability to transcend one's cultural boundaries and move across geographical borders have opened up an intercultural space that provide individuals with opportunities for new meaning making, helping them to expand their horizons of the world. This intercultural space is also referred to as a hybrid space or, in Bhabha's (1994) terms, an 'in-between' space, which he also interchangeably refers to 'the third space'.

According to Marotta's (2008), those who occupy a hybrid space is believed to have the potential to gain "enlightenment and critical world-view" (p. 295). Yet, as Bhabha (1994) points out, the occupation of this 'in-between' space is not without challenges; while occupying 'the third space', can be potential for creating new perspectives, it can also create tensions and ambivalence within individuals, which may result in one experiencing a crisis of identity.

In relation to this occupation of the third space and the notion of hybrid identities, this study seeks to inquiry into Luthfiah's journey of engaging with English in order to understand how these experiences have impacted her sense of self as an Indonesian.

2. METHOD

This paper emerged from constructive dialogue between a supervisor (Isti) and a student (Luthfiah). Our research collaboration has involved an ongoing co-construction of knowledge in which our ideas and

voices are interwoven within the work. While it was Luthfiah who 'collected' the data and wrote the autobiographical narratives, the work of conceptualizing, shaping and organizing this paper has been taken up by Isti. As such, the labor of writing up this paper is truly collaborative.

In conducting the study, we adopted a qualitative approach to research, drawing specifically on narrative inquiry (see Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) as its methodological tool. This research drew on a series of autobiographical narratives as its data source. These narratives were written based on Luthfiah's personal experiences, which she considered to be significant in contributing to her identity formation. The narratives revolved around Luthfiah's significant moments as she interacted with English. Luthfiah is a Sundanese-ethnic, Indonesian-born who is now in her twenties and is a student of the English Department at a university in Indonesia. When she was younger, she had the opportunity to cross national borders and lived in Qatar for two years and attended an international school, spending the final years of her primary education there. Retrospective reflection upon her experiences abroad, her experiences upon returning home and her exposure to the English language in both contexts, she felt that her identity has been impacted as a result. This study thus seeks to answer the following research question: *How has the exposure to English contributed to shaping Luthfiah's sense of self?*

The significant moments that Luthfiah raised in her narratives are titled as follows: (1) My first encounter with English, (2) Being a student in an international school and what follows, (3) Falling in love with English literature, (4) English as my study major, and (5) My identity markers. In reconstructing her narratives, she drew on a number of tools to better recall her memories: photographs, diaries, school notebooks, and social media status. Major themes were then teased out from these five pieces of narratives to help address the posed research question. These themes revolved around the following: (1) being fascinated with English, (2) feeling superior because of English, and (3) expanding the Self through English. The themes were then analyzed in light of Gomzina's theorization of multi-layered cultural identity and Bhabha's notions of hybridity and the third space.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Luthfiah's first encounter with English was when she was in elementary school in Indonesia. Precisely, it was when her parents told her that they would all be moving to Qatar that she started to seriously 'equip' herself with the language skills. For Luthfiah, experiences that followed—both abroad and upon returning—is what she called a process of 'learning by doing'.

3.1. Being Fascinated with English

Upon her return from Qatar, Luthfiah's experiences of learning English developed into some sort of fascination towards the language, manifesting in her claimed ownership of the language.

> "When I returned to Indonesia, I started to develop an attachment to English. As I already had some Basic English skills, I became so eager to learn English that English subject became my favorite subject in junior high school. I started to write a diary in English, listen to English songs, watch movies with English subtitles, read English literary works, pray in English and I even daydreamt in English. This kind of attachment is described as a sense of ownership, like, '…English was mine' kind of thing". (Personal narrative 2)

Luthfiah's claim of ownership of English indicates her strong attachment to English. When she was in junior high school, she thought that being able to speak English and talk to foreigners was cool and prestigious. Thinking about it now, her perceptions appear to resonate with some of Peru's younger generation who perceived English language as a way to gain prestige and a sign of distinction (Niño-Murcia, 2003). Here, English then functions not only simply as a tool of communication but also functions as a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1991). The notion 'cultural capital' has been defined as the accumulation of knowledge, skills and behaviours that one demonstrates to promote certain social status and power. Indeed, Luthfiah's cognitive knowledge of English soon turned into 'affection' and passion for the language, which can be seen to indicate the possession of the aforementioned cultural capital. Luthfiah's fondness of English is reflected in the excerpt below:

> "I hope I'll be fluent in English so that I can communicate with people from other countries (I choose this hope because English is very useful). I hope I can easily be fluent in some foreign languages (I choose this hope because I want to study abroad)". (Personal narrative 2)

Isti's inquiry into Luthfiah's statement of being "fluent in some foreign languages", however, pointed to only one specific foreign language in mind: English. Luthfiah felt that English was particularly valuable to invest in because it could provide her with a more promising future. Her opinion is line with Malik and Mohamed's (2014) study that uncovered people's reasons for learning English: the hope for better future and the opportunity for social mobility. The excerpts above provided a glimpse of what Luthfiah defined as 'successful engagement with English' at the time; that

is, being able to talk to foreigners and to pursue higher studies abroad.

As Luthfiah became more intimately engaged with the English language, she started to develop certain perceptions towards *Bahasa Indonesia.*

"When I talked in English, most of the time, I felt more expressive, articulate, confident, serious, alive, open, and free. Meanwhile, with *Bahasa Indonesia,* most of the time I felt the other way around. Ordinary, quiet, so-so, close, plain. These are the words that would describe how I felt. With all those feelings that I felt when talking in English that I mentioned above, I found myself more able to talk about thought-provoking subjects and taboo issues in English, such issues related to relationships and equality. I was able to put more feelings into whatever topics being discussed when using English. On the other hand, it was mostly about daily activity that I found myself talking about in *Bahasa Indonesia.* I thought that this had something to do with what popped into my mind when I thought about English, it was the word 'liberal'. Also, what I admired about the culture gave more reasons as to why I immersed myself in it, which also gave me the different feelings and perception towards both languages. It was the openness and individuality that I found admirable". (Personal narrative 3)

The above excerpt indicates that *Bahasa Indonesia*, for Luthfiah, became the negative mirror image of the English language. The association of English with certain cultural values, such as "liberal", "openness" and "individuality", reflects the intricately intertwined nature between language and culture. Her narrative also resonates with Lin's (2014) argument that the learning of English cannot be seen merely as the acquisition of linguistic forms but, more fundamentally, it also needs to be seen as being exposed to new values, perspectives and ideologies.

3.2. Feeling Superior because of English

Upon returning to her home country, Luthfiah's strong attachment to English, along with the educational experiences she had abroad, developed into some sense of superiority within her. She made herself stand out in English classes by showing off her English proficiency and knowledge of the language. She wanted to show and be acknowledged that her competence in English was better than most of her peers at school:

"There were several times where, without realizing, I looked down on my friends. I became so ambitious to stand out more than the others to

the point where I even saw it as a competition". (Personal narratives 2)

While more mature Luthfiah later thought of the above incidents as being unhealthy, she admitted that her fifteen-year-old self was indeed *that* competitive. Yet, she recalled one incident that opened up a window for self-reflection related to her competitive disposition. It was the time when she was involved in a storytelling contest that she realized that there were students who were better than her and that she had no reason for boasting.

Nonetheless, Luthfiah could not deny that she preferred reading in English rather than in *Bahasa Indonesia*. As she stated in her narrative, her preference was based on the feeling that English felt much more alive and richer, especially when it came to reading literary works. English words, as she said it, was able to give her some sort of sensation that stimulated her senses. However, her preference then turned to prejudices towards 'Indonesian-flavored things':

"As my fondness of English grew bigger and bigger, I tended to disparage *Bahasa Indonesia* that I put English first in anything: my preference on books, music, films, and so on. … Since Indonesia's television stations are mostly filled with soap operas, I had taken a dislike to Indonesian TV programs and even began to have prejudice against Indonesian films. I used to think that none of Indonesian films are qualified to meet a standard of a good film, hence not worth the time. Therefore, every time I went to the cinema I always went for Western movies". (Personal narrative 3)

The above excerpt indicates that Luthfiah is unconsciously experiencing some sort of tension within her in regard to how she saw herself as an Indonesian. This state has been identified by Bhabha (1994) as a sign of the occupation of the third space.

3.3. Expanding the Self through English

The excerpt below further reflects the confusion and ambivalence that Luthfiah was experiencing as she pondered upon her attachment to the two languages:

"I often questioned my 'Indonesianness'. The questions had always revolved around how far I actually knew about Indonesia, its histories, its rich cultures. How many percent of what I knew about it made me an Indonesian? How does an Indonesian become an Indonesian? I remembered a friend of mine could cry when he heard the national anthem of Indonesia. Meanwhile, I had never shed a single tear every

time I heard it throughout my entire life". (Personal narrative 5)

The inability to firmly determine her own position regarding her sense of belonging is another indication of Luthfiah's state of being in the third space. At the time, she felt that she was being pulled in the opposite directions by the way she felt towards English. It was not until she was in her undergraduate years that she was able to better comprehend her state of in-betweenness. Her university friends introduced her to Indonesian festival films from which she learnt about the richness of Indonesian cultures. One particular incident seems to have become a turning point in her perceptions about Indonesia, opening up a pathway for her to re-learn about her 'Indonesianness'.

"I was awakened when I scrolled through my Instagram feed and stumbled upon a video of a Chinese-Indonesian beauty influencer who delivered a content using her mother tongue. I was struck by it and thought, despite her English proficiency which I have no doubt at all, it was soothing to see something like that. As someone who hasn't been able to use the mother tongue often, I was ashamed and jealous of her; yet, seeing her gave me the encouragement to learn more about my roots and my cultural backgrounds". (Personal narrative 5).

Despite the initial confusion and ambivalence indicated earlier in her story, Luthfiah's occupation of the third space eventually emerged as situating her in a productive site (Bhabha, 1994). Through the tensions and inner conflicts, she had experienced, she was actually able to re-learn about what it meant for her to be Indonesian. Further, she was finally able to come to the realization that there are many ways of being Indonesian and that one's sense of belonging cannot be defined in a mutually exclusive manner; sense of belonging is not an 'either-or' matter. Rather, one can *be* and feel attached to many different things at the same time, which, in turn, pointed to the possession of hybrid identities. Through her engagement with English, Luthfiah was able to interpret and re-interpret her life experiences, hence broadening her horizons of the world (see Marotta, 2008).

4. CONCLUSION

Luthfiah's journey of 'knowing' English—being fascinated with it, feeling superior because of it and experiencing tensions and ambivalence created by the language—was eventually able to provide a space for her to expand herself as an individual. Despite the inner tensions she was struggling with at the beginning, she was able to turn English as a resource to better understand her hybrid identity. Indeed, English has

become a tool for Luthfiah to re-define herself as an Indonesian. This study thus confirms the idea that there is no one single way of defining who one is, as identity is multi-layered and complex. As Gomzina (2012) contends, there are a host of factors that contributes to one's identity construction; for Luthfiah, exposure to English is one of them. Yet, other interplays, such as religion, gender, and ethnicity, have been left unsaid in her narratives, and so Luthfiah's process of identity construction does not stop as her narratives end; on the contrary, as identity is always in the process of 'becoming', her identity, too, will continue to expand, "unfold [ ] and unfurl [ ] like a flower that never ceases to bloom" (Khan, Saigol & Zia, 1994, p. 19).

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