Exploring Identity through Engagement: Four Cases of EFL University Students

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Abstract

This study explored Southeast Asian university students' identity by examining their engagement. The objective of this study was to provide a better and deeper understanding of Southeast Asian students in

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a setting where English is used as a foreign language. There were four participants who were involved in this study, all of who were English majors. To explore identity through engagement, data was collected using a multi−methods approach: reflective journals, task completion, a group interview, and a post−interview with individual participants. The data was analyzed through a sociocultural approach with an interest in the meanings embedded in their lexical choices. What this study found was that the participants valued practicality when doing tasks pertinent to their studies. This may have led them to prefer working individually. Hence, in terms of engagement, most of these participants were seen to be engaged intrinsically, utilizing strategies that would help them accomplish their tasks individually. Based on the findings of this study, further research concerning specific language learning strategies, and the context of international students in a domain where English is spoken as a foreign language should be conducted.

Keywords: Student identity, engagement, international students, English as a foreign language

บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยชิ้นนี้เป็นการศึกษาการสร้างอัตลักษณ์ของนักศึกษาอาเซียน ในมหาวิทยาลัยผ่านการมีส่วนร่วมในการเรียน วัตถุประสงค์หลักของการวิจัยคือ การทำความเข้าใจต่อกระบวนการการตอบสนองของผู้เรียนในบริบทที่มีการใช้ภาษาอังกฤษ เป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ กลุ่มผู้เข้าร่วมในการวิจัยประกอบไปด้วยนักศึกษาเอกภาษาอังกฤษ จำนวนสี่คน การเก็บข้อมูลมีการใช้แหล่งข้อมูลที่หลากหลายเช่นแบบบันทึกที่สะท้อน การเรียนของตนเอง กระบวนการทำงาน และ การสัมภาษณ์แบบกลุ่มและเดี่ยว ทฤษฎี วัฒนธรรมทางสังคมถูกนำมาใช้ในการวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลซึ่งให้ความสำคัญต่อการเลือกใช้ คำของกลุ่มผู้เข้าร่วมในการวิจัยในการอธิบาย ผลของการวิเคราะห์แสดงให้เห็นว่า นักศึกษาที่เข้าร่วมในการวิจัยมีการให้คุณค่าต่อการปฏิบัติได้จริงเมื่อต้องทำงานที่เกี่ยวกับ วิชาเอกที่ศึกษา ซึ่งอาจเป็นผลให้นักศึกษาชอบทำงานเดี่ยว ในส่วนของการมีส่วนร่วม นั้นพบว่านักศึกษากลุ่มผู้เข้าร่วมในการวิจัยมีการใช้กลยุทธ์ในรูปแบบเฉพาะตัวใน การทำให้งานสำเร็จลุล่วงไปได้ จากผลที่ได้จากการวิจัยครั้งนี้นั้นทำให้พบว่าควรมีการศึกษา ต่อยอดในประเด็นที่เกี่ยวข้องกับกลยุทธ์ในการเรียนรู้ที่เฉพาะเจาะจงและประเด็นของ การที่นักศึกษาต่างชาติที่ต้องเข้ามาอยู่ในบริบทการเรียนที่มีการใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษา ต่างประเทศ

คำสำคัญ : อัตลักษณ์ของนักศึกษา, การมีส่วนร่วมในการเรียน, นักศึกษาต่างชาติ, ภาษา อังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ

Introduction

Studies have indicated how Asian learners of English are typically viewed as disengaged, especially in an international tertiary learning setting (e.g., Tran, 2013). This, unfortunately, is a misconception which mainly stems from the unfamiliarity of both teachers and students towards each other's teaching, or learning, preferences, especially if the teacher and student come from different cultural backgrounds (Cheng, 2000; Littlewood, 2000; Benzie, 2010). For example, Rao (2010) reported that while Chinese university students preferred direct and definite answers, their English teachers typically supplied them with multiple correct responses, and as a result, creating confusion and frustration among students. In another instance, Holmes (2006) found that Chinese university students studying in a foreign setting found it challenging to be involved in language learning activities that required them to be both intercultural and communicative with their New Zealand peers. In this particular study, the Chinese students had to revisit their understanding of being involved in an interaction, while at the same time reconstruct their conceptualization of relational harmony. Though these two examples pertain to the experiences of Chinese students in China and abroad, other studies on Asian university students have uncovered similar findings, such as those conducted on Japanese (Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002), Malaysian (Musa, Koo, & Azman, 2012), Lao (Souriyavongsa, Rany, Abidin, & Mei, 2013), and Thai students (Ueasiriwatthanachai, 2013).

This misconception may be rectified by examining and recognizing students' cultural backgrounds, as well as their personalities (Hirano, 2014). A way to do this is through the study of students' identity. The study of student identity not only includes the understanding of how the self is perceived, but also how the self is positioned in relation to others, which are crucial social entities in the conceptualization of

engagement. Taking this into account, this study explores how Southeast Asian university students completing a Bachelor's degree in English language are engaged in their academic pursuits. This study will offer insights into the English language learning processes of Southeast Asian students situated within a higher education setting where English is used as a foreign language. What this study found was students were engaged at an individual level and valued the notion of practicality.

Foreign Language Students' Identity through Engagement

Student identity may be defined by how students are engaged with external entities and the environment. Identity is viewed as an experience where a person makes sense of oneself and others through the negotiation of personal and collective experiences (Wenger, 1998). This is reiterated by Gu (2010), who defined identity as a construct that is fluid and susceptible to change through the complex and continual interactions between the individual and the social, as well as Norton (2000), who suggested that student identities are sites of struggle, where identities are shaped by the power present in the context of the identities. This process of interaction not only gives meaning for the present understanding of identity, but it also shapes possibilities for the future (Norton, 2013). What the studies on learner identities have afforded us are insights into cognitive and affective aspects pertinent for learning. In the area of second language learning, student identities have given us insights into issues pertaining to motivation (Gu, 2010), self-regulation (Morita, 2004), as well as learning strategies (Chamot, 2005; Nisbet, Tindall, & Arroyo, 2005). Student identity is thus valuable for both teachers and stakeholders to intentionally create environments conducive to learning. Such an effort values the uniqueness of each student (Early & Norton, 2012) and the fluidity of identities of learers,

and without undermining them as individuals with static learning needs (Anwaruddin, 2012).

Norton and Toohey (2011) mentioned that identity is linked with the concept of investment, in that language learners, or students, possess the desire to initiate or maintain social interactions with community practices which they perceive as meaningful and beneficial for their learning. In this light, investment could be considered an integral aspect of an individual's engagement with the social world. It is through engagement in learning that the discernment of self is facilitated (Anwaruddin, 2012; Kinginger, 2013; Hirano, 2014). Aside from the observable aspects of engagement, such as social interaction with other individuals, student engagement is also the emotional commitment one has to learning (Yorke, 2006). This is exemplified in Anwaruddin's (2012) study, where learners, because of familiarity, were motivated to use an online social networking site as a bridge for language learning. This led to more opportunities for collaborative and asynchronous learning, which encouraged students to be involved in knowledge creation and engaged in their learning. Aside from students' commitment towards learning tasks, engagement may also be discerned through contact between student and teachers (Kuh, 2001). Tasks assigned to facilitate learning may also serve as grounds to explore engagement, as different tasks may call for distinct types of mental operations or learning behaviors (Dörnyei, 2002). More than these, the context where a student finds him or herself in is a crucial variable that affects engagement. For instance, research has indicated that foreign students in international settings had better engagement when they developed a suitable level of intercultural competence or language proficiency (e.g., Hismanoglu, 2011). These abilities are further enhanced when they are motivated to be immersed or engaged within the new culture as a means to learn (Mirzaei & Forouzandeh, 2013), thereby resulting in better camaraderie with their foreign counterparts.

The students' sense of identity is also expanded in situations as such, not only being confined to their racial or national identity, but to layers of identity that are relevant to the setting in which new roles and responsibilities are developed (e.g., Yeh & Inose, 2003), and to be able to function in such contexts is a validation tool for foreign students (Moloney & Harbon, 2008; Hismanoglu, 2011). Nonetheless, there have been reported instances when there was minimal engagement by foreign students. This was seen in contexts where students were not inclined or did not know how to socialize with other (local or foreign) peers, or if teachers or the institution did not provide sufficient guidance to develop students' skills for being engaged (e.g., Holmes, 2006; Magnan & Back, 2007).

Research Context and Participants

Southeast Asia, as well as other regions throughout the world, has seen an influx in the establishment of foreign and international higher education institutions (Altbach & Knight, 2007). In Thailand, the internationalization of higher education saw the arrival of foreign students, especially from neighboring countries, not to mention upper and middle class Thai students who can afford international fees (Schiller & Liefner, 2007; Lavankura, 2013). Through international education, students are privileged with the mobility to pursue opportunities for empowerment through international perspectives, which, in turn, may reconfigure students' sense of identity. These international programs also offer environments where English is the main mode of communication for various types of EFL speakers. What we see here is a sense of cosmopolitanism, wherein,

"[t]he new thinking is that regardless of where these Englishes are located, English now belongs to everyone who uses it. This implies an element of liberation from being particularly associated with a language standard by virtue of place of birth." (Holliday, 2009, p. 151).

Nonetheless, the internationalization of higher education is not without resistance. It is known that in the Thai context, maintaining Thai identity, or Thainess, is vital. Thainess instructs the Thai people to uphold certain characteristics, such as being respectful to the King and to the Nation's religion. Some of the common aspects which have become well−known, especially in hierarchical relationships, are having meekness and consideration *(krieng−jai)* or kindness or empathy (nam jai; hen jai) (Atmiyanandana & Lawler, 2003). The spirit of Thainess is not only emphasized in an official school setting, but it is also inculcated in the home and in the society (Tubporn, 2011; Kaur, Young, & Kirkpatrick, 2016).

Taking note of the internationalization of higher education, and the high probability that cultural tensions may occur in contexts as such, our study was carried out at a private international university located in the central region of Thailand. Though only with a student body of approximately 1200, there were at least 30 different nationalities represented at the time of research. This gave this institution a truly international outlook, a distinct identity that is recognized by the government authorities. A majority of the student body come from Thailand and other parts of Asia, which is typical of higher education institutions in Thailand (Lavankura, 2013), and the teaching faculty also come from various countries. The institution has two programs: an international program and a Thai program. While the former is a full−fledged English program, the latter program is predominantly Thai, but at times, also has courses offered in the English language.

There were four Southeast Asian students involved in this study. They come from Malaysia, Vietnam, Thailand, and Laos. The students were all English majors studying with the Faculty of Arts and Humanities. Three of the students were third year TESOL students, while one student was a second year communications student. Their courses at the third year were both theoretical and practical. For instance, TESOL students will need to take two courses on TESOL methodology in addition to other courses on classroom management, teacher professionalism, and language assessment. In the second methodology course, students are already expected to conduct in−class micro teaching. After the methodology class, they will then need to spend a whole semester completing a teaching internship. This is the same for communications majors, wherein an internship is done after completing all the theoretical courses. Nonetheless, even in theoretical courses, there are numerous opportunities for the application of theory. For example, courses normally have research projects or academic services that aim at addressing a particular concept or theory discussed in class. In terms of learning, students at the research site are considered familiar with a multitude of learning approaches due to its multicultural setting. The learning culture is also considered quite progressive, as seen in the use of a learning management system (to support asynchronous learning), as well as the combination of lectures and task−based assignments. Furthermore, because their teachers and classmates are from different countries, English is the default lingua franca for communication. The participants' pseudonyms and a brief history of their language backgrounds are provided in Table 1.

Table 1   Pseudonyms and language background of participants.

Name	Nationality	Language Background
Weena	Thai	Speaks Thai, Akha, English Has been speaking English for approximately six years Learned English by communicating with international friends, reading English books, English mass media
Caslyn	Lao	Speaks Lao, Thai, Hmong, English Has been speaking English for approximately five years Learned English formally when started university studies
Nichan	Malaysian	Speaks Malay, English, Kadazandusun Has been speaking English since childhood Learned English from family, friends, and school
Meemi	Vietnamese	Speaks Vietnamese and English Has been speaking English for approximately five years Learned English formally when started university studies; mass media

Data Collection

Since the study of engagement involves taking into account beliefs and practices of the self, as well as the relations of the self with other entities (Wenger, 1998), this study employed a multi−methods approach to gain an in−depth and holistic understanding of individual learners' lived experiences and perspectives (Morita, 2004; Tracy, 2010). The methods used are reflective journaling, task completion, and group interviews. The reason for a multi−methods approach was not necessarily

for the purpose of triangulating data so as to see whether there is convergence at the end. Instead, the use of multi−methods sought to, "allow different facets of problems to be explored, increases scope, deepens understanding, and encourages consistent (re) interpretation" (Tracy, 2010, p. 843). This is akin to the concept of crystallization, wherein researchers are not working in proviso for a, "valid singular truth, but to open up a more complex, in−depth, but still thoroughly partial, understanding of the issue" (Tracy, 2010. p. 844).

Reflective Journals

The data collection process began with a reflective journal consisting of narrations of the participants responding to three broad narrative themes, collected over the span of about a month. Through the reflective journal, the participants were able to reflect on their engagement with their language learning experience at a tertiary level, thus providing the researchers with learning experiences, struggles, assumptions held by learners that are not immediately visible to teachers, as well as how the learners relate with other entities and their context in different temporal spaces (Bell, 2002). Furthermore, as stated by Polkinghorne (1995), the act of narrating could also guide in the understanding of actions taken in the past (and in the present) even if the narrative is diverse in its themes. This is expected, especially for second language learners, as they navigate their developing identity through different social entities and parameters, time and space (e.g., Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott, & Brown, 2012). Our study, on the other hand, was interested in at least three themes pertinent to engagement, which are the participants' attitudes towards learning, struggles or challenges, and other critical incidents that may have affected the learning process. Specifically, participants were encouraged to disclose the struggles they faced in their study based on the assumption that

students who are engaged in their line of study would be aware of difficulties, or of possible imbalances in power, that they may have in their studies (Norton, 2013). Furthermore, significant transformations, identified through critical incidents, may divulge information regarding the multiplicity of the subjects' identities. Critical incident refers to some situation that will point out some significant changes in the life of a person, and it provokes the individual into selecting particular kinds of actions to represent an image of their identity (Angelides, 2001). Specific prompts which corresponded with the broad themes of engagement, determined from our reading of the literature, were developed to aid the participants of this study narrate their experiences. More than acting as guides, these prompts were also considered as means of convenience as these students had other assignments and responsibilities (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008). These prompts are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Reflective journal prompts.

Themes	Prompts
Attitude towards the study	1. I can describe my study experiences as … 2. My study experiences have been positive/negative because… 3. I look at problems as… because… 4. My problems are issues that affect me individually/ as a member of a community because...
Individual struggles	1. The challenges I currently face in my studies are… 2. I am facing these problems because…
Significant transformations (critical incidents)	1. There have been incidents in my study journey at university which have shaped how I see myself as a student. For example, an incident…

Task Completion

The second form of data collection was accomplished through a problem−solution task, or task execution, which supported student engagement and collaborative learning behavior (Dörnyei, 2003). We opted to implement collaborative task completion to add to the research framework because this type of learning, and also others which are self−regulated, or require student autonomy, has been looked at in isolation. Meyer and Turner (2002), on the other hand, suggest that even tasks, whether individual or collaborative, are a social process and are driven by environmental and social constraints. For this task the participants were paired and each pair was assigned a hypothetical research topic. They were given about ten minutes to brainstorm, and to formulate at least two research questions pertinent to the topic. This process was done through a think−aloud protocol. While the participants discussed, the researchers took notes of their behaviors, especially their verbal exchange.

Semi−structured Group Interview

The final data collection phase was the group interview. The interview was organized in a semi−structured format, and the interview questions were formed based on preliminary analysis of data collected from the reflective journals and task completion. The purpose of this interview was to allow the researchers to engage with the participants on points which emerged as significant throughout the other data collection phases for further elaboration. This interview session also gave a chance for both the researchers and participants to clarify issues which may have been misunderstood. Ultimately, the interview session gave the participants an opportunity to re−story their reflections. This was to ensure the validity of the interpretations of the students' narrative entries. The participants were also interviewed as a group because it

reflected the socialization aspect pertinent to engagement. Furthermore, there was no concern about sharing with their peers since these students have been classmates for the past three years and have lived in close proximity (they were all boarding students). There was also a post−interview session with individual students to clarify their earlier contributions (Clandinnin & Connelly, 2000; Sudtho, Singhasiri, & Jimarkon, 2015).

Data Analysis

To explore identity through engagement, we resorted to a sociocultural linguistic approach, as proposed by Bucholtz and Hall (2010). We also used a grounded approach, wherein there were no expectations for how the data of each participant would take form. To achieve these, we adapted the relationality principle, which: "emphasizes identity as a relational phenomenon" that is built based on the notion that "identities are never autonomous or independent but always acquire social meaning in relation to other available identity positions and other social actors", and "to call into question the widespread but oversimplified view of identity relations as revolving around a single axis: sameness and difference" (Bucholtz & Hall, 2010, p. 598). These relations were derived from pragmatic indexical referents present within the participants' discourse. These indexical referents come in the form of: lexical choices, meaning understood from discourse, or even from the observed behaviors of the participants. In terms of lexical choices, overt forms such as the use of pronouns may give insights into the relations held between the participant and other entities (Creese, 2002). Other lexical choices may be those that attribute rights or duties on self or other entities (Trent, 2012). A more implicit approach to gaining an understanding is through the iterative reading of the lived experiences of the participants. This approach reflects the three−dimensional

space approach forwarded by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) whereby experience is understood through interaction between personal, social, and context from the past and present, as a means to gauge beliefs or actions, even as a means to predict future actions (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002).

Findings

Participants' data were treated and presented as individual case studies. The findings presented do not attempt for generalizability. We were also cautious in reporting only positive data. Instead, what we present in the following sections is what we deem a comprehensive overview of the findings gleaned from the participants' data. Findings will be described in a narrative form that indicated both the commonality and variability that existed among the participants (Morita, 2004). Each participants' case is organized based on the narrative prompts used in the reflective journals, which are, in broad terms: participants' attitude towards study, individual struggles, and critical incidents. These discussions are undergirded by relationality, as a means to glean more insights into engagement.

Weena

From Weena's reflective journal and semi−structured interview, we found that she uses the ambiguous second−person pronoun, 'you', instead of directly referring to herself or other social entities. This pronominal marker may reflect a positive attitude, in that Weena positions herself as an informant, whose beliefs and practices are applicable to other students.

[1] An assignment is to help you to practice more on the subject or the lesson so you can use it in real life to help you. But it's not simply handing in your assignment. It has conditions, like if you don't turn your assignment in on time, or if you didn't do well, you will be graded, so there's a pressure too'' (Interview Session).

From excerpt [1], several assumptions may be drawn. First, Weena may be distancing herself by enacting authority, or a form of independence, through her portrayal of herself as one who has experience relevant to others. Another type of relation may be that of being inclusive with the rest of the peers. After all, 'you' is rather ambiguous and in certain causes can be an equivocation strategy (Bull & Fetzer, 2006). When analyzing further extracts, we can see how Weena may be leaning towards being distant from her peers in her learning experience. As seen in extract [2], Weena divulges how she may be emotionally affected by school work. The negative emotions felt in stressful situations are self−contained, even when attempting to solve tasks, as this is what she 'should' do, and her 'duty' to do.

[2] When I encounter a lot of problems, I tend to get worried. I will be nervous about everything and sometimes I cannot finish my work because I feel anxious. However, sometimes, I can overcome problems easily because I enjoy solving them. I try to look at the problems as something that I should be able to solve or as my duty to do (1st Journal Entry).

Though Weena mentioned that she enjoys 'overcoming' problems, she realized that this was not always the case. In times when she is pressured, Weena takes on a practical approach, wherein she would need to, "work hard on it to get the grade and not just for learning".

Weena's sense or practicality is further elaborated when she mentioned that in her university studies, there is the possibility that one may not like what one has to do [4].

> [3] ...when the pressure is on you, you don't enjoy working on it; instead you rather see it as something that you need to work hard on to get the grade and not just for learning (Group Interview Session).

> [4] It could be sense of accomplishment, Even though you don't like it but you can do it that's mean you can accomplish something that you don't like, you don't have to always like what you do' (Group Interview Session).

At this point, it becomes rather obvious that Weena sees herself as an independent student. This was asked of her in the follow up interview, and Weena mentioned:

> [5] I think we should be given time to work independently when we brainstorm/bring out ideas (Post−Interview Session).

Extract [5] again reiterates Weena's strong preference for being engaged. Moreover, in this instance, we could also see how Weena is again speaking on behalf of her peers. This time, though, she is using an inclusive and collective pronominal marker, 'we'. When asked why Weena preferred working alone, she again reiterated that her learning journey is something which is personal. In the end, it is her own 'mind' that needs 'stretching'. Only in instances where she is required to be engaged with other students will she work collaboratively, as seen in [6] during the task completion activity.

[6] I prefer working alone as it is my personality… actually I choose that topic because I'm concerned about her. Because when I choose something that I like, just for my personal preference, she might not benefit from it. So we choose a topic that we can relate to together (Task Completion Response).

She would also interact with others to see how everyone is progressing. This could be a self−assessment strategy that Weena employs [7]

[7] Yes, I do sometimes. I want to see how their papers are going. What kind of writing they use and just to compare my research paper and their papers (Group Interview Session).

Another reason why Weena prefers working on her own is because of the perceived lack of quality in engagement when others approach her for help [8]

[8] Because when they ask me for help they don't seek for deeper information. They just simply want to know the answer. But some people ask which part of the article did you find the answer in? It shows that they want to learn something. They really want to know. But some people don't ask like that (Post−Interview Session).

What we can see from Weena's discourse is how she positions herself as an independent learner − one who is not bound by relational constraints except in circumstances that call for collaboration. This independence also translates into positioning the self as one who has authoritative knowledge over what other students would do. A critical incident recounted from her second year illustrates the origins of the change to a preference for independent learning:

[9] I indeed had a negative experience working in group while studying in AIU. And because of that, I prefer working alone. I do not have to worry whether the group members are doing their parts or if they get offended by the differences of ideas. One of the incidents that strongly shaped my attitude about group work happened when I was a sophomore. I was grouped with two other students to work for a research project. When I was working with them, I felt very uncomfortable to suggest ideas or lead out the discussion. I was afraid that if we had different opinions, it would create personal conflicts among us. And because the other two were not very active in working for the project, when we had to discuss and plan for the project, our group did not perform as well as we ought to. [...]. But still, the other two remained inactive in doing group work, so I ended up working more than them. They hardly finished their parts on time, thus I had to remind them from time to time; it was very uneasy for me to do so. Also, sometimes they did not know what to do, so I had to be the one working for their parts. I felt that it was unfair that each one in the group gave different among of effort in the work. I also thought that group work was not so effective in bringing out a good performance because the cooperation among the group members was poor (Post–Interview Session).

Nichan

The sentiments that Nichan has regarding engagement is somewhat similar to that of Weena's. Nichan does not look at engagement as a social construct. Instead, it is something that is understood as a personal development resulting from the interaction of self and the learning materials, as well as the teaching approaches of her teachers. Other than looking at learning as an individual endeavour, Nichan also took the liberty to distance herself by using ambiguous yet inclusive third person pronouns, such as 'they'. When asked to elaborate her thoughts on being socially engaged with learning, Nichan appears to speak on behalf of other students [10], a similar strategy employed by Weena.

> [10] They are just not motivated to do anything, maybe because they don't see the purpose of doing it (Group Interview Session).

The sentiment seen in [10] appears to be a validation for what Nichan herself believes in, that is, that learning is done independently, and that her peers, like herself, may not see the purpose of working collaboratively. Only in instances where they are required to work together will Nichan take into account what her co-workers thought of [11].

> [11] If I need help I can ask them some sources that can help me to do my independent study. But collectively for example in group work I learn together with them. I like to do the task together (Post-Interview Session).

Nichan works independently to the extent that she might not even engage her lecturers for help. Instead, she outsources help from other sources [12].

[12] Yes, usually I do online searches. So far I never asked teachers. When I find something on the internet, I ask my friends what they think about this and then I ask the teacher if it is okay (Post Interview Session).

[13] The process was personal since I don't really like to work in a crowd or group, and it was because I preferred to work things out on my own as long as I can do the given task and assignments (1st Journal Entry).

[14] For me I don't really like to work together with people because sometimes I feel distracted. When I have what I have in mind already and then sometimes another idea comes I think it is not relevant/related to my class. I feel it is wasting time. You have so many things to share but finally I will still use my own idea if it is really not relevant (Post−Interview Session).

Again, as seen in 13 and 14, Nichan reiterates her preferred mode of engagement, that is, to be engaged with herself. From a language learning strategy perspective, the ability to be engaged in one's self may be likened to one's metacognitive strategy, in that proper planning may be organized to execute a complete a learning task. Chamot (2005) states that those with metacognitive abilities are able to match different types of appropriate strategies to handle different learning tasks. Nichan's preference to be engaged with herself is further reiterated when she delves into her purpose for her educational pursuit [15], which is essentially for her own instrumental purposes.

[15] [My purpose is] [t]o learn more about English. My purpose for taking English is to learn more grammar, to be able to teach and for functional use (2nd Journal Entry).

To this point, it appears that Nichan is very practical in her approach towards education. This perhaps explains why Nichan did not see the relevance of some of the English courses she had to take, especially those courses which served a more knowledge−building or aesthetic function (e.g., history of the English language, phonetics, literature) [16]

[16] Yes, and sometimes for some courses I think it is not relevant for example courses like History. Well, I'm not saying it is not relevant, but maybe for practicality reasons it is not directly relevant to my major (3rd Journal Entry).

Caslyn

Though Caslyn begins by distancing herself from other students, through the use of a third person exclusive pronoun, "they", she immediately shifts to an inclusive pronoun, "we", and "I". Aside from this instance, Caslyn refers to herself the rest of the time. Perhaps what could be seen here is an attempt to deflect negative attitudes held by the self towards university work

[17] I think students view assignment negatively because of they are lazy. Sometimes we have assignments from another class and it's a lot, students get stressed. And sometimes for me, I always think about the assignments. I cannot sleep at night (Group Interview Session).

In other occasions during the data collection period, there were instances when Caslyn overtly viewed assignments negatively. Nonetheless, she sees the value in these assignments, which could be seen as her metacognitive ability to determine the cognitive purpose of these assignments, on top of reflecting her commitment towards her education journey (see Zhang, 2010) [18, 19].

[18] It is bad because I can't sleep peacefully and the next day I cannot concentrate in class. I mean when there are too many assignments, they bother me. If there was just one or two assignments, normally they don't bother me (2nd Journal Entry).

[19] For me, assignments actually help me to learn and solve problems, like solving skills and searching for more information beyond the book. But sometimes I view assignments negatively, maybe because of the amount of the assignments. It is too much, so that is the negative thing about assignments. But normally, I don't think assignments as being bad (1st Journal Entry).

In terms of engagement, Caslyn had a different approach. While she sees the value in being independent, she is not opposed to the idea of asking for help from others when needed. This, of course, only happens if she is unable to resolve a problem on her own [20, 21]. What is reflected here is also an awareness of how she works, in that there is a route or plan that she takes when working on an assignment. An interesting point, though, is her attitude that asking for help may be a nuisance to others. This type of emotion could be a form of meekness (Thai: *krieng jai*), which is typical to the context of the study and to Caslyn, a Lao student.

[20] I don't like people to bother me when I am reading something or when I am concentrating. I want to get deeper understand first. So if I just go directly and work with people then I'm not sure what I am supposed to say what exactly the text means. So I prefer to work with myself first (Post−Interview Session).

[21] Most of the time I will work alone first, then if I don't understand something then I will look for friends or teacher and ask for help' (Task Work Response).

Aside from wanting to challenge herself first, or perhaps due to the cultural norms of the learning environment, Caslyn also shared a critical incident which shaped how she engages herself with her work, in particular, with group work.

[22] I like to work individually or independently because I think that way I can express my opinion toward that particular topic or assignment. I used to work in a group or with a partner and I don't really like it. [...] One time, we had a big group project to be done before the final exam. We divided the tasks and each of us had to complete before the due date. We trusted each other, but one of our group members could not finish it on time and so we did not submit the assignment on time. Because of that we got B instead of A. It affected our grades (Post Interview Session).

Caslyn's independence may also be seen through her socioeconomic background, where she attributed her approach and attitude to learning to her family background.

[23] Because I was born in a poor family so when I was young, we never had enough for ourselves and always asked my parents, we want this and that, but they couldn't provide what we wanted. He always gave example like 'If you want your children to have what they ask then you have to work hard for better education. So you choose, I do not force you. There are two ways – you want a better life, you work hard, if you don't want, it's up to you, that's your life' That motivates us to choose the good or better things (3rd Journal Entry).

[24] I am more independent, because my parents are not well educated. My father always encourage me to be independent; he tells me that I need to study for a good future' (Post Interview Session).

Meemi

Meemi, contrary to her other classmates, seemed to enjoy activities where participation by others is required and is observable. She explained that she appreciates working with others as this gives her the opportunity to clarify what she does not know, and it is also a practical approach to completing tasks [25]. Another example she gave was of the open online forum that she did in one of her courses. Nevertheless, there were times when Meemi also viewed assignments negatively, especially when there are many [26].

[25] I like to work with friend for assignment that I don't understand and also for research paper…When working alone it will take a lot of time' (Task Work Response).

[26] Assignment for the class that I like... I enjoy to the forum because it is useful for me in but when we have many assignments at the same time, I have lots of due dates. It is a lot of pressure' (Group Interview Session).

In spite of Meemi's positive inclination towards group work, she did have experiences where she struggled working with others. This could perhaps be seen in the following incident which may have led Weena to question the value of doing group work.

[27] Another group work is the research paper. Last semester, we had to do group research project. So we divided the parts of the research project among our group members. Since I was the group leader, I asked them to edit their first draft and send me the final draft. But one of the group members did not edit her work and sent the first draft (Post Interview Session).

Aside from having a negative attitude when it comes to the amount of assignments and the potentially ineffective cooperation between students in group work, Meemi also does not have a positive disposition towards writing tasks.

[28] Doing research takes a lot of time for reading, identifying necessary information for the topic…. I don't really like writing, so when I need to write a paper, I will feel stressed (2nd Journal Entry).

Nonetheless, Meemi is able to mitigate these negative attitudes by strategizing her work process [29]. Also, she is aware that her approach towards these assignments should be one that is optimistic and valuable for her educational journey [30], and having confidence through validation through results of her summative assessment [31].

[29] When I feel like that usually I feel lost, I will write down the list…I will list the deadlines for me to submit the assignments, or the day I have a test or exam, then I will do them one by one (Group Interview Session).

[30] I want to receive knowledge and do homework effectively... not being forced by the deadline of the assignments' (1st Journal Entry).

[31] I want to have a better GPA every semester as my friend do. I feel encouraged when I see my friends study hard. My friends made me realize that I have to study hard not only for myself but also for my family, for people that I love' (3rd Journal Entry).

Another critical incident that affected Meemi was perhaps how her view changed when she began her university education. Meemi comes from a well−to−do family, and upon meeting other students from different socioeconomic backgrounds, she was compelled to show others that she is committed to her studies.

[32] I have everything. At first, I didn't really think that education was important because I really couldn't see the point at that time. When I came here, I made friends here, their situations are totally different from mine. They have experienced so much difficulties in life. I feel sad because I have everything but they were struggling. I feel guilty and to show how much I appreciate what I have, I try to do better in my studies' (Post−Interview Session).

[33] I want to prove to others that I try hard, and I
am responsible, and not someone who does only a
little because of a good life (3rd Journal Entry).

Discussion

The aim of this study was to gain insights regarding Southeast
Asian students studying for an undergraduate degree in English language
in an EFL setting. The multiple sources of data, which presented
different discourse spaces, helped us to be aware of how self is socialized
with others. What we noticed from the data indicated broad learning
strategies, which are not necessarily specific to language learning. We
observed that the participants utilized metacognitive strategies (e.g.,
being able to plan or being aware of one's learning preference), which
could be a representative of the students' whole learning journey. This
may be due the learning of English as a subject course, instead of as
a skills course for proficiency improvement. An assumption which we
may draw from this is that when students are of a certain level of
proficiency, their learning strategies may tend to be broad, instead of
strategies specific to language learning.

What does this study say, then, about the identity of these
international Southeast Asian students? First, similar to the study of
Norton Peirce (1995), we could see that identity among the participants
is not static. Instead, it is dynamic, and changes according to the context
they find themselves in. This is what Norton Peirce (1995) referred
to when she discussed identity as a site of struggle. We can see the
'struggle' especially in instances where the participants had to disclose
their attitudes towards their learning. Almost all of them deflected a
negative attitude by attributing a problem (or a negative attitude) to an
ambiguous other. The 'struggle' could also be seen in the dissonance
created by a mismatch between their individual learning preferences

and university tasks assigned to them. This was most obvious when some of the participants shared critical incidents regarding collaborative or group work. These struggles are expected, especially since these students are speakers of multiple languages. It is for these students in international settings where teachers need to recognize and attend to, "multiple identity positions from which to engage in the language practices of the classroom, the school, and the community" (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p. 432). Hence, some identity pairs which were found to be at odds with each other include: empowered students who would readily admit personal weaknesses, versus those who are cautious and reticent, who, especially in a collective context, would be inclined to enact face−saving strategies; and individualistic students who prefer independent work but are still willing to approach others for help if needed, versus collectivist students who learn from others and whose learning progress is measured by means of comparison with others.

These struggles bring us to the second issue pertinent to their identity, which is concerned with the ways in which they were engaged in their learning environment. It appears that these students, regardless of their attitudes or approaches towards learning, were invested in the notion of practicality. The interest in practicality was evident among the participants of this study. We could see from the narratives of the participants that there are times when assignments are numerous, compelling them to make use of efficient ways to complete them. In the context of the study, it is very common for higher−standing courses to be more student−centered, which places more emphasis on student output. The rationale behind this approach is to ensure that these students will be able to use various skills (including language) to tackle different tasks. This 'practical' rationale of the courses suits the 'practical' reasoning of the students, and it reflects the 'practical' ideology that is purported by the English language. The globalized status of English has brought with it the view that the use of English

is cosmopolitan and pervasive. Hence, perspectives of practicality and efficiency towards the English language, and its use, have become dominant (see Holliday, 2009; Benzie, 2010). Nonetheless, there may be instances where cultural norms take precedence over practicality. This again brings us back to the issue of dissonance between ideologies, resulting in struggles of student identity.

Concluding Remarks

While this study implemented a multi−methods approach to examine the identity of EFL students through engagement, the challenge of data validity still persists. Even though the re−storying of narratives may address this issue, other modes of data collection (task completion and focus group interview) and interpretation occurred only once. Taking this into account, as well as the results from our study, an area of interest recommended for further examination would be the cognitive learning processes of not only language courses, but also other types of disciplinary courses, conducted in a multi−methods approach and a longitudinal, comprehensive manner. This could also help address Benzie's (2010) recommendation, "to raise awareness of the inextricable interconnectedness of language learning and disciplinary learning in higher education" which "could easily be lost in current moves towards more experiential learning if language and academic literacy learning continues to be seen by students and academics as something that is separate from disciplinary learning" (p. 457). Another issue worth examining is the seemingly similar approach employed by the participants, despite some minor circumstantial differences. Perhaps an ethnographic approach would be suitable so as to highlight potential dissimilarities, especially when considering the socio−historical backgrounds of the participants. This may offer support to academics in keeping abreast with the changing nature of international education and in managing mobile international students.

All in all, this study adds to the literature concerning Southeast Asian students' management of their studies in the English language in an EFL setting (Zhang, 2010). What we have seen is how the identities of the participants are fluid, and that no static or definite identity can be attributed to any four of them. This is in line with the postmodern view on identity as a site of struggle (Norton & Toohey, 2011). Furthermore, the precepts of engagement, which take into account students' attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs about work, the school learning environment, and their interaction with others (Yazzie–Mintz, 2007), also coincides with the research focus of ELF. In an international setting, the learning process could be complex, especially when English is used as a lingua franca to bridge social entities from different cultural backgrounds. Research of such settings, especially those where English is a lingua franca, is important, as it addresses accommodative behaviors of its users operating according to contextual constraints (Jenkins, 2011). What this has afforded us is not only insights into language use emergent from EFL settings, but will also lead us towards a better understanding of the globalized linguascapes that are made up of ideologies that exist in a context of plurilithic Englishes (Pennycook, 2009).

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