

English and Me: The Fact of Learning English in Constructing Learners' Identity

Yohanes Wilbowo

Satya Wacana Christian University

Indreswari Pinandita

Satya Wacana Christian University

Jessica Landum

Satya Wacana Christian University

Sherly Phan

Satya Wacana Christian University

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the influence of learning English towards students' viewpoint about their identities. With regard to the perception that learning a language cannot be separated from also learning its culture, the researchers believe that it may affect the shaping process of the students' identities. Identity term was examined in terms of a description of a person's conception and expression of their individuality or group affiliations (such as: national identity and cultural identity). As English Department students in SWCU are learning English, there is an assumption of phenomenon that they tend to mix their mother tongue or L1 with English in their daily conversation. Therefore, based on that phenomenon, we want to find out how learning English construct the students' identity. Our data were taken from the open-ended questionnaires we distributed for 100 English Department students of four *Angkatan* (2007, 2008, 2009 and 2010) as our participants. The study addresses the following question: How does learning English affect English Department students' identities? Our findings from this study indicate that although most of the participants are positively influenced by English, they do not change their viewpoint about their identities as Indonesian.

Key words: Learning English, Identity, Culture

INTRODUCTION

An awareness that people who involved in language learning and teaching has again begun to realize the intertwined relation between culture and language (Pulverness, 2003). It has been emphasized that learning language itself cannot be separated from learning the culture because language is a part and reflection of a culture. A great discussion among L2 educators about how to teach and make the students successfully learn the target language actually has already been talked among the researchers. For instance, in the early of 20th century researchers discussed the *importance* and *possibilities* of cultural components into L2 curriculum. (Sysoyev and Donelson, 2002).

Human being are unique creatures that are gifted such an ability of human nature independent of culture; studying an L2, in a sense tries to find out the nature of another people (McDevitt 2004). Supposed there are more researchers as McDevitt who believe that human nature

is faultlessly related to the culture than people who want to study L2 indeed need to study the L2 culture as well.

The worldwide use of English made Pennycook (2003) define a term, English as an International Language (henceforth EIL), that is used to indicate the use of English as a communication tool. English is used to communicate between two L2 speakers of English, whether sharing the same culture or not, as well as between L2 and L1 speakers of English.

While identity itself has been attracting a great attention in studies of social sciences includes learning process. Often in the sense of learning language in multicultural context, connections between language and identity have been considered as something essential (e.g. Le Page and Tabouret-Keller, 1985; Pavlenko and Blackledge, 2004) but these second language users' identity have received less attention nevertheless, so that this topic has started attracting more interests in several years recently regarding to the use of English as an International or a Foreign Language in non-English speaking countries. (for overviews, see Block 2007). Some studies have conducted earlier usually only explored and dealt with second language learners' identity in context of where target language is used as a native language and their participants are usually the migrant learners (e.g. Norton 2000, Block 2006) or people who work or study abroad (Jackson 2008; Kinginger 2004; Polanyi 1995). Their assumptions tend to be about how the learners are expected to have speaking ability as native speakers- like. (Virkkula and Nikula 2010). But one thing that is different in this study is about the focused area of study. Our context is focusing on Indonesia, where English as the focused target language is still used as a foreign language only instead of a native language. This study will show how Indonesian students view their identity constructing as foreign language users.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In early research by Gardner and Lambert (1972), it is mentioned that the notion of "integrative" motivation- the desire to learn a language to be in some sense closer to speakers of the language, and part of their culture- was considered the best basis for success. This integrative motivation expressed as a positive interests in peoples and cultures associated with a language. However, there are recent studies which analyzed problems of "identity loss" as children learn languages (Downes, 2001; Jo, 2001).

Language definitely plays an essential role in a person's individuality since it is certainly a way of communicating one's identity. Many people identify others by the language they are dominant in, the way they do things, and the way they vary their way of speaking depending on who they are talking with. When students are imposed to learn different language and culture, their knowledge of both cultures may be messed up and it would affect their identity. The clash between two cultures starts even when the language spoken (Eoyang: 2003). Seeing the context of Indonesia, most of L2 learners live in a monolingual (*Bahasa Indonesia*) and monocultural (Eastern-Oriented culture) environment. As the result, they have a tendency to become culture-bound person who have a propensity to make too quick opinion and to wrongly judge the value about their culture and other cultures as well.

This situation can somehow mislead the students to think that other languages are weird and make them tend to show such negative responses toward the learning of L2 and its culture. That is the reason why, sometimes we found some parts of English culture are taught in class to enrich

students' understanding of how to speak it properly as it is spoken by native English according to native contextual situation. Here, we can see that it has just emphasized how language, culture, and identity are related from one to each other. A language reflects the cultural background of the language's speakers and the cultural aspects that are reflected in the way the individual speaks will reflect their identities. This journal tries to represent how learning English Language and its culture play its role or give such effects towards to English Department students of Satya Wacana Christian University's identities. Therefore, since most of ED students speak more than one language; Indonesian, local language and English, we want to know whether speaking English affects their identity or not.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Although Indonesia has traditionally attempted to foster a strong sense of identity in its schooling and culture and been contributing its students as English as Foreign Language users, such an examination of the learners' identity has not yet attracted a great deal of attention in English Department of Satya Wacana Christian University. To address the issue above, in this study we try to explore these research questions below:

1. Does learning English as Foreign Language influence the students' identity construction in English Department? If it does then to what extent and in how their changed manner is applied in their daily life?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Hopefully, this paper can be such a contribution for people who are involved in both teaching and learning of English as a foreign language. Especially in the context of English Department of Satya Wacana Christian University, in which there is a lot of students who study English as their international language and they are also introduced to both English speakers culture and their native culture. This study can be helpful inputs for them in enriching their knowledge and understanding of a common phenomenon happened in their department regarding to their identities shaping process while they are learning English as foreign languages.

Also, this study can also be very advantageous for the L2 lecturers, both native and nonnative English speakers, as this study will give them insight of students' perception of their identities while they are learning English and hopefully, it can help them to teach English as a foreign language wisely.

As this study finished, now we are looking forward for more studies and research on this topic. Hopefully, the topic that we brought in this paper and also the data we represent in this paper will somehow gives such an insight and inspiration for more studies.

KEY TERMS

Definition of terms used in this study is following to help readers better understand the analysis.

Identities

According to Virkkula and Nikula (2010), there are two fundamentally different ways in conceptualizing identity: essentially and non-essentially. One's identity is considered to be something stable and singular and it is also perceived as something connected to the person's self, according to

the essentialist view, whereas in the non-essentialist identity is viewed as something unstable, unfinished, multiple, tend to change and transform and constructed according to times, places, positions, practices and discourses. (see e.g. Hall 1996; Woodward 1997).

The used approach in this study in viewing identity is from the non-essentialist perspective in which identity is believed can be changed and multiple according to its constructing process in discourses, interactional and context of the environment where the learners are in. (Pomerantz 2001).

The term of identity used in this study is referring to the construction of the identity of users of English as Foreign Language as revealed in questionnaire with Indonesian students that were conducted during their study in English Department in Satya Wacana Christian University where English is not the mother tongue but it is taught and shared by native teachers or teachers who have studied abroad in English speaking countries.

Poststructuralist theories of identity that were conducted by some prominent scholars like Pavlenko and Blackledge 2004 which are combined with Norton's (2000) as well as Kenkins (2007) who view on the language learners' identity construction, are also drawn in this study. This study shows how language learners draw on different views in shaping their identities as foreign language users.

Learning English

Learning English may have a lot of different point of views of the way how it is implied in the teaching and learning process e.g. learning English as second language, learning English as foreign language, learning English as international language or lingua franca. In this study we refer to learning English as a Foreign Language.

Culture

Culture definition in general may be various. According to Warwick (2008) "Culture is undefined but it still can be inferred to a meaning of a group of people who share practices, perspectives and products. Yet culture can also refer to the shared practices, perspectives and products themselves". In this study we view culture as the second criteria that culture is viewed as the shared discourses of the group of people.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Literature review

Culture could not be seen only from the real things such as clothes, staple food, and so forth or even abstract things such as traditions and beliefs. More than that, culture has much deeper understanding and definition of its own. Yet, culture is defined as similar perception of certain community who shares the similar understanding of beliefs, norms and values about certain things that affects their manner. The definition of culture itself is much more than any tangible things that people may see from any communities' appearance (Pratt-Johnson, 2006).

When people are communicating to each other, we cannot deny that we need a medium in which we can share our idea to others. Therefore, language plays an important role in communicating each other. While culture may affect people's characteristic, then one of the experts,

Dörnyei (1998) were suggesting that language and culture are inseparable, it means that we cannot omit the importance of any these two aspects because they are influencing language learners' achievement as well as shaping their identities.

Language and culture has an authentically embedded association (Leveridge, 2008). If a language learner wants to acquire a language and to be able to apply the language in successful communication, he/ she has to learn, think, feel, and react as the target language users (Jenkins, 2000). It shows that language learners are also required to learn the target language culture (Allwright & Bailey 1991; Leveridge, 2008) and it also means that language learners are culture learners (Jenkins, 2000). Cultures and cultural ties are sustained and transmitted by using the language. The language itself mirrored the cultural ties and distinct viewpoints within the society (Miller, 2010)

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The importance of recognizing the correlation between language and culture in L2 learning in shaping students of L2's identity has been researched by many experts. The numbers of prominent scholars who are focusing in this field were showing their positive attitudes toward the connection between the aspects. Most of them have conducted the research to prove how significant is the influence of learning the second language culture in order to enhance the second language learners' understanding or comprehension of the target language.

RESEARCH DESIGN

A. Participants

The researcher used quota sampling in doing this research. The participants of this study are 100 students of English Department- Satya Wacana Christian University. The students are

representatives of four class- years. They are students from years of study 2007, 2008, 2009, and 2010.

B. Context of the study

The study is conducted in English Department- Satya Wacana Christian University, Salatiga.

C. Data collection

The data for this study was collected in a week. The data was taken from the questionnaires that are distributed to 100 students of English Department of Satya Wacana Christian University. These 100 participants consisted of 25 students from each year of study (2007, 2008, 2009, and 2010) as the representatives. Students were asked to respond to three- item questionnaires.

D. Questionnaires

The three-item questionnaire utilized in this study aimed to assess these themes: (1) attitude towards the target language (2) the influence of learning Target Language to students identity (3) cultural awareness (of both native and target culture). In the first item of our questionnaire we asked the participants whether learning and studying English provided any kind of contribution to any aspects of their daily life. Whereas in the second item of the questionnaire aimed to figure out if the participants of this study became more aware of their own and the target culture's in sense how it influences them as the speaker and learner of English. And the last item was concerned with whether there is an attitude change happened to participants towards the target language.

According to the answer we got from the questionnaires, we pilot the answers according three categories: positive, negative, and so-so, for each year of study. The result of this investigation shows that the younger the year of study the higher positive spirits in their life in speaking English. Conversely, the older the year of study the lower spirits they have in speaking English. With regard to the influence of learning English with students' behavior and mindset, most of ED students stated that their behaviors, mindset are also affected by English. However, even though English affects their lives, most students still consider themselves as Indonesian and apply Indonesian culture in their daily life.

DATA ANALYSIS

The responses of the participants were analyzed through manual statistic that classified according to the theme and their class year. Results and their interpretations will be presented in tabular form, referring to each item included in the questionnaire.

Theme 1 : The Attitude Towards the Target Language

We began the questionnaire with the item asking whether the students have a certain image in learning English. We believe that if at the very beginning the learners already have a certain images about speaking English it will influence to their attitude in using English such as the way they speak. From the data below, most English Department students at Satya Wacana Christian University give responds to the use of English positively. Most of them feel confident when they are speaking English.

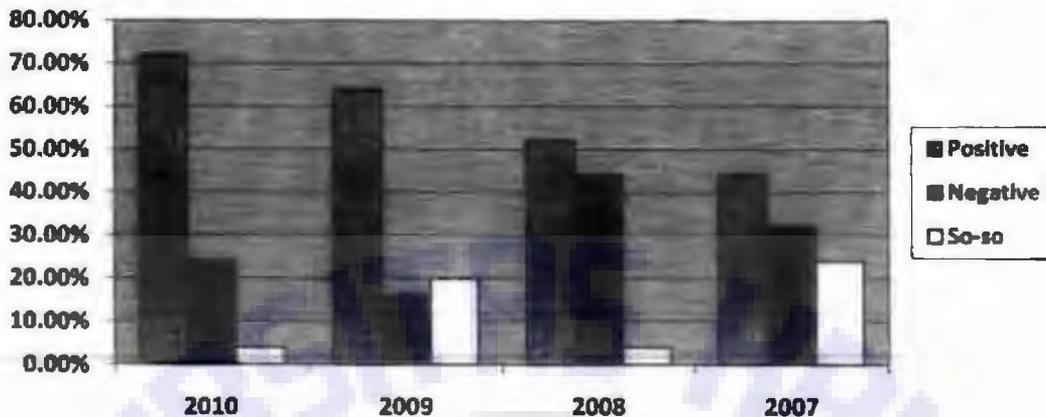
We take 25 students from each class year (2010, 2009, 2008, and 2007). All participants sent back the questionnaire that we gave to them. So, the total participants are 100 participants.

Table 1 below will illustrate the results received for this item.

Item No.	Item	Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1.	How do you feel when you speak English?	2010 : 1. Positive : 18 persons 2. Negative : 6 persons 3. So-so : 1 person	25 Students for Each Class Year.	2010 : 1. Positive : $18/25 \times 100\% = 72\%$ 2. Negative : $6/25 \times 100\% = 24\%$ 3. So-so : $1/25 \times 100\% = 4\%$
	How do you feel when you speak English?	2009 : 1. Positive : 16 persons 2. Negative : 4 persons 3. So-so : 5 persons	25 Students for Each Class Year.	2009 : 1. Positive : $16/25 \times 100\% = 64\%$ 2. Negative : $4/25 \times 100\% = 16\%$ 3. So-so : $5/25 \times 100\% = 20\%$
	How do you feel when you speak English?	2008 : 1. Positive : 13 persons 2. Negative : 11 persons 3. So-so : 1 person	25 Students for Each Class Year.	2008 : 1. Positive : $13/25 \times 100\% = 52\%$ 2. Negative : $11/25 \times 100\% = 44\%$ 3. So-so : $1/25 \times 100\% = 4\%$
	How do you feel when you speak English?	2007 : 1. Positive : 11 persons 2. Negative : 8 persons 3. So-so : 6 persons	25 Students for Each Class Year. Total participants: 25 x 4 = 100 participants.	2007 : 1. Positive : $11/25 \times 100\% = 44\%$ 2. Negative : $8/25 \times 100\% = 32\%$ 3. So-so : $6/25 \times 100\% = 24\%$

From the data, we conclude that the younger class year has more positive spirits towards the use of English when they speak, whereas the older class year has less positive spirits or about balance percentage between positive and negative spirits towards the use of English when they speak.

From the first data, we transfer it into the form of diagram. Below is how the result looks like:



Theme 2 : The Influence of Learning Target Language to Students Identity

We started the questionnaire with the item asking whether the students' identities are influenced while they have been learning English. We believe that when we learning the language we also learn its culture therefore somehow it can also affect to their mindset of their own identity.

From the data below, most English Department students at Satya Wacana Christian University feel affected In shaping their mindset about their own Identity. While learning English, they feel it helps in shaping their identities. However, we are worried about which cultures do they prefer as their identity. Yet, our worries are useless, the reason of this will be explained clearly from the third theme below.

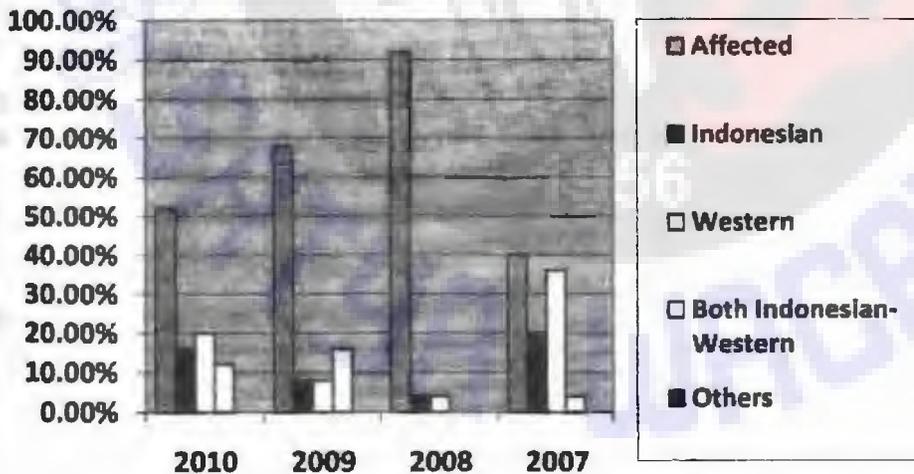
We also take 25 students from each class year (2010, 2009, 2008, and 2007). So, the total participants will be 100 participants who give respond to our questionnaires. Table 2 below clearly illustrates the results received for this item.

Item No.	Item	Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
2.	How does speaking English affecting you as a person?	2010 : 1. Affected : 25 persons 2. Not-Affected : 0 3. So-so : 0 4. Abstain : 0	25 Students for Each Class Year.	2010 : 1. Affected : $25/25 \times 100\% = 100\%$ 2. Not-Affected : 0% 3. So-so : 0% 4. Abstain : 0%
	How does speaking English affecting you as a person?	2009 : 1. Affected : 22 persons 2. Not-Affected : 2 persons	25 Students for Each Class Year.	2009 : 1. Affected : 88% 2. Not-Affected : 8%

		3. So-so : 0 person 4. Abstain : 1 person		3. So-so : 0% 4. Abstain : 4%
	How does speaking English affecting you as a person?	2008 : 1. Affected : 23 persons 2. Not-Affected : 1 person 3. So-so : 1 person 4. Abstain : 0 person	25 Students for Each Class Year.	2008 : 1. Affected : 92% 2. Not-Affected : 4% 3. So-so : 4% 4. Abstain : 0%
	How does speaking English affecting you as a person?	2007 : 1. Affected : 23 2. Not-Affected : 2 3. So-so : 0 4. Abstain : 0	25 Students for Each Class Year. Total : 25 x 4 = 100 participants	2007 : 1. Affected : 92% 2. Not-Affected : 8% 3. So-so : 0% 4. Abstain : 0%

According to the data, we may see that most of ED students feel that after they are learning English, their behaviors, mindset are also affected.

Here is the chart from the Theme 3 data:



From all of the data we have got, we can conclude that most of the students have positive attitude or feelings toward English. More or less, they feel have a great honor to have a western culture inside them. However, even though English affects their identity as Indonesian, they rather to consider themselves as Indonesian rather than any other cultures.

CONCLUSION

Based on the data, we may conclude that most of the students have positive attitude or feelings toward English. They feel that their behaviors and mindset are affected but they feel have a great honor to have a western culture inside them. However, even though English affects their identity as Indonesian, they prefer to consider themselves as Indonesian rather than any other identities. This fact also reveals the reasons why most students still apply Indonesian culture in their daily life.

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