Identity Negotiation and Construction Among Saudi Learners of English as a Second Language

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Abstract

This qualitative longitudinal phenomenological study was conducted to investigate identity negotiation and construction in a second language (L2) learning environment. Data were collected from 35 Saudi learners of English in the United Kingdom over a one-year period using a background information questionnaire, three sets of in-depth interviews, which were carried out before, during, and after the study abroad (SA) program, and monthly reflective journals. Data analysis revealed several opportunities and challenges that the participants encountered during their SA period. The findings also showed that most learners succeeded in negotiating and constructing an intercultural identity, which allowed them to actively seek out opportunities to participate in the host community and improve their language-learning outcomes. However, for a few learners, experiencing identity conflicts and failure to construct their desired identity was a primary obstacle to their language development as they tended to withdraw from social interactions. The study concluded by presenting a number of implications for SA programs and directions for future research.

Keywords

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is a communication system by which individuals express themselves; hence, it is an essential component of an individual's identity. As Dörnyei (1998) pointed out, learning a new language involves, among other things, developing an identity in the target language and target culture. Unfortunately, while most previous study abroad (SA) research has focused on the acquisition of language components and skills, the perceptions, attitudes, and responses of the learners remain underrepresented. However, the relatively recent emphasis on the social aspects of learning in applied linguistics has called for more in-depth investigations of learners' reflections and reactions regarding their experiences abroad (Coleman, 2013). Due to the substantial increase in the number of Saudi individuals studying abroad since the 2005 initiation of the Saudi Scholarship Program, bridging this gap in research has become more pressing. A crucial question is why these learners manifest varying degrees of linguistic, personal, and social development. Kinginger (2013) argued that the way learners interpret their experiences in language-learning contexts depends on their identities. Block (2007, p. 27) also pointed out that "identities are about negotiating new subject positions at the crossroads of past, present, and future." Hence, identities are multiple and can often be contradictory (Morita, 2012). Given the nature of SA, learners may exhibit different behaviors according to whether their experiences with either the second language (L2) community, culture, or both are congruent with their desired identities (Darvin & Norton, 2016). This process of identity negotiation impacts on individuals' interactions as well as their commitment to language learning and use (Kinginger, 2013).

In linking contemporary sociocultural theories with practice, this study attempts to address the existing research gap by providing an in-depth investigation of the various personal, social, and cultural factors that could have an impact on the identity development of adult Saudi learners of English in the United Kingdom, an English as a second language (ESL) environment. The main purpose is to better understand how the learners negotiate and construct their identities in the L2 community and the impact of the SA experience on their language learning. This is especially important since English is considered a foreign language in Saudi Arabia (i.e., it is not officially or widely spoken in the country). The inquiry is guided by the following set of questions:

1. What opportunities and challenges did adult Saudi learners of English encounter during SA?
2. How did the learners negotiate and construct their identities during SA?
3. How did the learners' SA experience impact on their learning outcomes?

These questions were developed from the theoretical framework outlined in the following section as well as the ongoing data collection and analysis. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first study that investigates identity negotiation and construction among Arab learners of ESL. The study aims to provide rich information by triangulating data from a variety of sources, as will be explained in Section 4.2.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The process of L2 learning is often considered a social event in which attitudes, behaviors, and reactions interconnect, giving form to multiple identities (Luk & Lin, 2007). Identity is defined as "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (Norton, 2000, p. 5). Hence, identity comprises "our understanding of who we are and who we think other people are" (Danielewics, 2001, p. 10). Norton (2000) further argued that when learners communicate in an L2, they not only exchange information but also continuously formulate and reformulate their identities and their relationships with their interlocutors. Hermans and DiMaggio (2007, p. 35) explained that L2 learners find themselves on the boundaries between their native culture and the target culture in a context where these cultures interact and interconnect. They "come together and meet" within the individual learner, and, subsequently, affect his or her identity. Because individuals may affiliate themselves with more than one language or culture—or more than one of each—individuals can possess multiple identities that are "switched on and off" so that they can either fit into the L2 community or set themselves apart from it.

This study, therefore, addresses L2 learner identity within a sociocultural framework that considers the interdependence of individual, social, and cultural factors in the process of L2 learning. The focus is not only on what individuals do in a specific learning or communicative situation—as is the case in most linguistic data analyses—but also on how and why they act the way they do (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001). Henceforth, Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of communities of practice (CoP) is used as a focal point in this research because the quantity and quality of individuals' participation in a CoP can influence their identity development. To become members of a community, novices need to gain "access to a wide range of ongoing activities, old-timers, and other members of the community; and to information, resources, and opportunities for participation" (Day, 2002, p. 15). Legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) is a process that presents newcomers to the community with norms and practices before they can become members of it (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 37). Hence, *peripherality* is a positive term that proposes "an opening, a way of gaining access to sources for understanding through growing involvement" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 37). Regarding *legitimacy*, as Wenger explains further:

> In order to be on an inbound trajectory, newcomers must be granted enough legitimacy to be treated as potential members. . . . Only with legitimacy can all their inevitable stumblings and violations become opportunities for learning rather than cause for dismissal, neglect, or exclusion (1998, p. 101).

However, Kanno (1998, p. 129) argued that although essential to learning success, learners are not always offered enough opportunities to interact with native speakers of the L2. They are sometimes subject to ascribed identities due to one or more of the following characteristics: gender, social class, outsider status, and ethnicity. In this case, learners often employ their agency to negotiate their status and gain a powerful rather than a marginalized position (Weedon, 1997). According to Ahearn (2001, p. 112), agency is the "socioculturally mediated capacity to act" that enables learners to adopt desirable identities or resist ascribed ones through, among other things, participation, abstention, or careful language use.

3. PREVIOUS STUDIES ON L2 LEARNER IDENTITY

Previous studies (e.g., Hsieh, 2006; Kim, 2014; Lee, 2014; Marx, 2002; Morita, 2004) have investigated the role of learners' social and cultural identities in ESL learning contexts. Marx (2002), for example, presented a first-person account of her experiences as a language learner in Germany. She contended that acceptance into the target culture facilitated adoption of the L2 accent. That was because the target culture was echoed in the pronunciation and rhythm of the L2. Kim (2014) investigated the link between language and sociocultural identities of ESL learners in Malaysia. The results showed that in a multiracial context, identity issues were multifaceted, and identity adjustments were often observed as the learners navigated their way into the CoP. In her study of six Japanese female students in Canada, Morita (2004) reported that the L2 learners were inhibited by relations of power, which they often resisted. They negotiated their hosts' ascribed identities in order to place themselves in a powerful rather than a marginalized position. Hsieh (2006) emphasized the importance of investigating East Asian females' personal, psychological, and social investments in L2 learning contexts as those investments were reflected in their interactions with the host community. Lee (2014) conducted a longitudinal case study to examine how a Korean student's investments facilitated her LPP in both academic and non-academic contexts in the United States. Data analysis revealed that the learner's identity was constructed across time and place, which allowed her to actively seek out opportunities to participate in the host community.

As we can see, the participants in the empirical studies reviewed above were from varied ethnic backgrounds. To the best of my knowledge, only a very few studies (Giroir, 2014; Norris, 2011; Rich & Troudi, 2006) have been undertaken to investigate the identity negotiation of Arab students in ESL contexts. A common finding in these studies was that the students had to constantly negotiate their identity and sense of belonging in order to attain fuller participation in the host community. This research therefore aims to expand the current literature by exploring how and why Saudi Arabian

learners of ESL negotiate and construct their identities during SA as well as the impact of the experience on their learning outcomes.

4. METHOD

This research employed a qualitative longitudinal phenomenological approach to provide a comprehensive account of the learners' perceptions of their own identity development and track any changes in their ongoing experience. As Johnson and Christensen (2004, p. 367) explained, "In a typical phenomenological research study, the researcher collects data from several individuals and depicts their experience of something. The data are usually collected through in-depth interviews . . . to reduce the statements to the common core or essence of the experience as depicted by the participants." The following sections begin with a description of the participants' selection process and their demographic information, followed by the instruments used to collect the data. There follows a description of the procedures used for data collection and analysis.

4.1 Participants

Purposive sampling was used in this research, in which the characteristics of the population of interest were specified, and then individuals with those characteristics were located (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). To best address the research questions of the study, the targeted individuals were Saudi Arabian adults (with ages ranging from 21 to 40) learning English in the UK, an ESL environment. Learners of both genders and all proficiency levels were invited to participate in the study in order to explore whether these variables had an impact on identity development.

As Creswell (2003) pointed out, sample size in qualitative studies should be sufficiently large to obtain the data needed to illustrate the phenomenon of interest adequately. For phenomenological research, Creswell (2003) suggested including 5–25 participants. Patten (2005, p. 146), however, suggested the criterion of *saturation* to obtain an adequate sample size in qualitative research. Saturation takes place when including more members in the investigation does not yield further information or themes. Therefore, the "point of saturation" can determine the final sample size. Both Creswell and Patten's suggestions were taken into account in this research. First, it was decided that 25 participants were needed for this study. However, an important consideration was that a few participants in the original sample might withdraw from the study at a later stage; thus, the final sample might end up being smaller than intended. To get around this challenge, Johnson and Christensen's (2004, p. 219) recommendation was followed, in which the number of people to include in the original sample was obtained by multiplying the desired sample size by the response rate. As the sample size needed was 25 people and approximately 70 percent of them were expected to participate, the number of people included in the original sample established at 36 participants.

At the beginning of the research, invitations were sent to the targeted individuals, along with a consent form and participant information sheet, which explained the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, and the methodology used. All participants had just arrived in the UK to commence their English language programs. Their institutes offered similar intensive programs, which covered the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Despite the long time span of this study, only one female participant withdrew; therefore, all of her data was disposed of and not included in any stage of the analysis. This reduced the total number of learners who participated in all stages of this research to 35 (N = 35).

The participants' demographic information was collected using a background information questionnaire that was developed specifically for this study. Arabic was the native language of all of the participants, and they all had studied English for six years in intermediate and secondary schools in Saudi Arabia. The rest of the demographic information is listed in Table 1.

Table 1 Participants' Demographic Information

Variable	Value	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	16	45.71
	Female	19	54.29
Age	21-25	10	28.57
	26-30	11	31.43
	31-35	8	22.86
	36-40	6	17.14
English proficiency	Elementary	9	25.71
	Pre-intermediate	6	17.14
	Intermediate	9	25.71
	Upper Intermediate	4	11.43
	Advanced	7	20.00

4.2 Instruments

Three instruments were employed to collect the data needed for this research: (a) a background information questionnaire, (b) three sets of in-depth semi-structured interviews, and (c) monthly reflective journals. The interviews and journals requested that the participants reflect on the opportunities and challenges they encountered during SA. They also probed the ways in which they negotiated and constructed their identities and how they thought the experience impacted on their learning outcomes (see Appendices A and B). The interviews were used because of their potential to provide insights into the participants' perceptions, attitudes, and experiences in much greater depth than quantitative surveys (Kvale, 1996). According to Wang (2010, p. 59), "learner perspectives provide invaluable data that cannot be obtained through observation or testing." Furthermore, the reflective journals served to elicit the learners' immediate reactions to their SA experience. As Krishnamurty (2008, p. 197) pointed out, "The main advantages of diary methods are that they allow events to be recorded in their natural setting and, in theory, minimize the delay between the event and the time it is recorded." This triangulation of data sources, along with *member checking* (described in Section 4.4), were used to "build a coherent justification for themes" and to validate the accuracy of the findings (Creswell, 2003, p. 196).

4.3 Data Collection Procedures

The study started with the reception of the signed consent forms from the participants, which confirmed their agreement to participate. That was followed by the first stage of data collection, namely, completing the background information questionnaire.

As explained above, this study was carried out over one year, using three rounds of in-depth semi-structured interviews. The first round of the interviews was conducted immediately before the participants started their ESL programs; hence, they were exploratory in nature and probed the learners' expectations of the programs. The second round of the interviews was carried out half-way through the programs (after a period of approximately four to six months) and provided opportunities to clarify, elaborate on, and confirm the themes that emerged in the monthly journals. The participants were asked to reflect deeply on their SA experiences over the previous months, such as the opportunities and challenges they encountered or incidents of negotiation during which they adopted identities that they desired or resisted identities that were ascribed to them. The last round of interviews took place after the participants finished their SA programs, and they were asked to reflect on their experiences and how they influenced their learning outcomes. All interviews were conducted in the participants' L1, Arabic, and were audio recorded. Most of the interviews lasted between 45 minutes and an hour.

The learners used the reflective journals to jot down their reflections on the opportunities, challenges, or both that they faced in their interactions as well as the impact of those factors on their identities and, consequently, on their L2 development. The journals allowed the learners to both introspectively and retrospectively reflect on their encounters, which helped to shed light on aspects of L2 learning that were not easily identified (Allwright & Bailey, 1991). They also served to cross-

reference the themes that emerged in the interviews. The participants were offered the option of writing the journal entries in Arabic or English.

4.4 Data Analysis

As explained in Section 4.3, three rounds of interviews were conducted with each of the 35 participants who chose to continue until the last stage of the research, yielding a total of 105 interview transcripts. In addition, a total of 315 journal entries were analyzed in this research. The entries ranged in length from 62 to 114 words, with the average being 81 words. It was found that five of the seven advanced learners wrote all their journal entries in English, while all others preferred to use Arabic.

After the interview and journal data were translated and transcribed, they were coded thematically (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Following a tradition in qualitative research, data analysis was conducted iteratively and operated in tandem with data collection, which allowed the themes obtained in the initial analyses to be explored in the subsequent interviews (Creswell, 2003). The interview transcripts and journal entries were reviewed several times to identify dominant themes and categories (Merriam, 1998). The qualitative data analysis software NVivo was used in the first stage of this research to code and categorize the data. The themes obtained from each participant's data were compared with those obtained from the other participants in order to identify similarities and differences among the cases. As initial conclusions emerged, the journals and the interviews were triangulated to support and explain the results. The interpretation of the data was based on the adopted theoretical framework and existing studies. The results then underwent member checks (i.e., informant feedback), whereby the participants were consulted to validate the accuracy of the analysis. They all agreed that the findings accurately represented both the positive and negative aspects of their SA experiences.

5. RESULTS

Before presenting the findings of this study, it is important to point out that similar themes were obtained from participants of different genders, ages (despite the wide age range examined), and English proficiency levels. This provided evidence that gender, age, and language proficiency did not seem to have a noticeable influence on the identity development of the participants. Although a few elementary-level learners attributed the constraints on their identity to, among other things, their low English proficiency, the same challenge was reported by learners from all the other proficiency levels. For purposes of anonymity, all names used in this study are pseudonyms.

The first research question looked at the opportunities that the participants found particularly useful during their SA experience. Analysis of the interview data and journal entries yielded five major themes. First, it was found that meeting and interacting with new people was regarded by the majority (80%) of the learners as an important aspect of SA. For example, in her mid-SA interview, Sarah excitedly explained, "I am fascinated by living overseas and being able to communicate with different people and develop relationships with them. I have always been intrigued by travel, languages, and other people's customs." Sarah later added in her journal that she enjoyed interacting with people in English as it made her feel like a "global citizen" (Sarah, month 8 journal entry). Fahad similarly noted, "I am very grateful for having the chance to interact with people from a different background . . . . Of course, there are foreigners in Saudi Arabia, but here, the experience is quite different. It's their home country, so I get to meet people from different social and economic classes" (Fahad, mid-SA interview). The analysis of Fahad's journal entries revealed interesting findings as well. In the five journal entries obtained from the fifth to the ninth months, it was found that Fahad kept mentioning the names of the new people he interacted with, with a brief description of everyone and a few comments on each incident. For example,

> Last Monday, I met Tom, a 25-year-old British guy working at a café. He looked very friendly but very quiet at the same time. I approached him and started asking him a couple of general questions, such as if he was studying somewhere, married or not, and so on. I was surprised to learn that his parents were wealthy, but he was living on his own here as he was doing graduate studies and had to depend on himself for tuition fees (Fahad, month 5 journal entry).

The responses of most (71.43%) of the learners indicated that their native English teachers played a significant role in their experiences, both linguistically and socially. For instance, when Dalal was asked about the individuals who had a positive impact on her English learning, she immediately replied, "My English teacher, of course. I don't know what I would do without her feedback and guidance. I practice my speaking and writing skills with her almost every day" (Dalal, mid-SA interview). Another participant also commented that his English teacher "always started the class with a brief explanation of something unique about the British culture and how she thought it might be surprising to newcomers" (Ahmad, post-SA interview). Hence, it was not unexpected to find that nine learners mentioned their English teachers in each of the eight journal entries they wrote from the third to the tenth months.

The theme of culture also emerged when it was found that almost two thirds (65.71%) of the learners reported that studying abroad provided them with the opportunity to develop cultural knowledge and awareness of different cultural values and beliefs. This was seen as widening their horizons and helping them connect more easily to the host community, as expressed by Nasir: "Before coming to the UK, I didn't know much about the British culture. However, the more I have access to it, the more I feel I am becoming part of this community" (Nasir, month 9 journal entry). Similarly, Norah pointed out the significance of learning about the British culture and how that made her more conscious of the differences between people with different cultural backgrounds. For example, Norah stated in her post-SA interview, "I feel that I am now more sensitive to the differences between us and the British people regarding ways of thinking and behavior that result from our different cultures."

Furthermore, almost half (48.57%) of the participants commented that living abroad contributed to acquiring new interests, which positively influenced their lifestyle. The following examples illustrate this theme:

Since I am surrounded by people who work out every morning, daily exercise has become a priority for me. I wake up at 5 o'clock to bike, jog, or just walk. It helps clear my head and keep me more focused on my lessons" (Fayez, month 4 journal entry).

Being surrounded by a wide variety of interesting reading materials and activities here has gotten me quite addicted to reading. I enjoy reading; it's a source of pleasure for me. I now read every single day" (Saleh, mid-SA interview).

Lastly, almost a third (31.43%) of the learners were living with host families and, interestingly, they all remarked that the complete immersion experience was extremely beneficial to them as it facilitated the improvement of their language skills. For instance, in one journal entry, Ali commented as follows:

My host family, especially the father, is very kind and supportive. They care about my English progress and always encourage me to converse with them, especially over meals. I have acquired a lot of formal and informal expressions from them and have started to use them already" (Ali, month 10 journal entry).

Likewise, when Muhammad was asked about the influence of his host family on his learning experience, he enthusiastically replied,

I am so grateful for their hospitality and all the help they offered me. Whenever I felt confused about anything, for example, what preposition or adjective to use, they would immediately supply it for me and provide other examples to clarify its use (Muhammad, post-SA interview).

The positive experiences of the learners who were living with host families could help explain the increase in their out-of-class English use during their SA period. Fig. 1 demonstrates the five major opportunities that had a positive effect on the participants' SA experience.
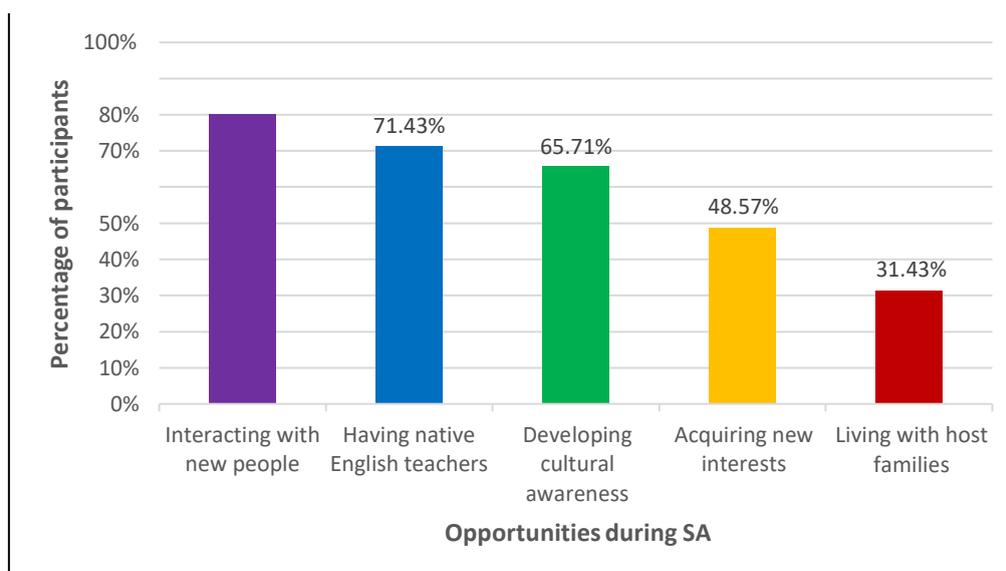
Fig. 1 Opportunities That Had a Positive Effect on the Participants' SA Experience

Data analysis also revealed five major challenges that the learners encountered during their SA experience. A major challenge emphasized by almost two thirds (65.71%) of the participants was the need to develop their English language proficiency in order to improve their communicative competence. For example, in her mid-SA interview, Zainab noted: "In order to be able to communicate with each other clearly, we all have to work on our English and improve it." Iman also agreed that communication involves negotiation of meaning among interlocutors in order to achieve mutual understanding and avoid confusion. She shared this comment: "Communication is a two-way process of exchanging ideas. My limited English knowledge sometimes keeps me from interacting in English. I am embarrassed I may not understand the message or the other person might misunderstand what I say" (Iman, month 1 journal entry).

Another communication challenge was reported by more than a third (34.29%) of the learners, namely, having difficulty understanding individuals with thick accents and those who used local words when speaking. Faisal, for instance, commented as follows:

I needed to exert considerable effort to understand those who had a strong regional way of speaking. I didn't want them to think I was rude, so I tried really hard to at least get the general idea of what they were saying to avoid asking them to repeat themselves (Faisal, post-SA interview).

Likewise, when reflecting on her interactions with native English speakers, Mariam remarked, "Sometimes it was difficult for me to understand native speakers, especially when they used slang words or talked really fast. As a non-native speaker, I wished they had tried to use more formal words when talking with me" (Mariam, post-SA interview).

Although the learners were aware of the importance of communicating in English in their daily life activities, more than a quarter (28.57%) of the learners of all proficiency levels reported that it was sometimes cognitively demanding for them to think and speak in English. Ahmad, for example, wrote as follows in his second-month journal entry: "When I need to speak to someone outside of class, like a salesperson or a waiter, I find it quite difficult to remember the rules of grammar and pronunciation every time I speak." Aisha also mentioned in her mid-SA interview that "it didn't feel natural to speak about personal topics in English. It took the fun out of it."

The fourth challenge identified in the data pertained to self-identity and was obtained from one-fifth (20%) of the participants. Fatimah, for instance, described herself as an introverted person, and she felt unable to integrate into the L2 community: "I often feel passive and try to avoid not only social gatherings but also conversations. I just can't socialize with people properly, and, obviously, that's why my spoken English hasn't developed since I arrived here." (Fatimah, mid-SA interview). Hashim also commented in his journal that his shyness prevented him from making a long-term investment in genuine friendships: "Despite being here for seven months, I still find it difficult to make connections with others. I am shy and would prefer to avoid social situations. That's why I only have superficial relationships with the people here" (Hashim, month 7 journal entry).

Lastly, a relatively smaller proportion (14.29%) of the participants complained about having few chances for social interactions with the locals due to low receptivity from their hosts, who they felt regarded them as "outsiders" in the community. They reported having several international friends but found it challenging to befriend the locals. Below are a few examples of further reasons they provided:

"The locals are busy with their lives and have their own friends already" (Layla, month 6 journal entry).

"I feel they consider us a bit different from them because we have different interests and hobbies" (Ibtisam, mid-SA interview).

"I tried to make friends with a couple of locals, but we didn't work hard to maintain the relationship. It was just more natural to hang out with my international peers, probably because we were in the same situation" (Bandar, post-SA interview).

The five major challenges that had a negative effect on the participants' SA experience are displayed in Fig. 2.
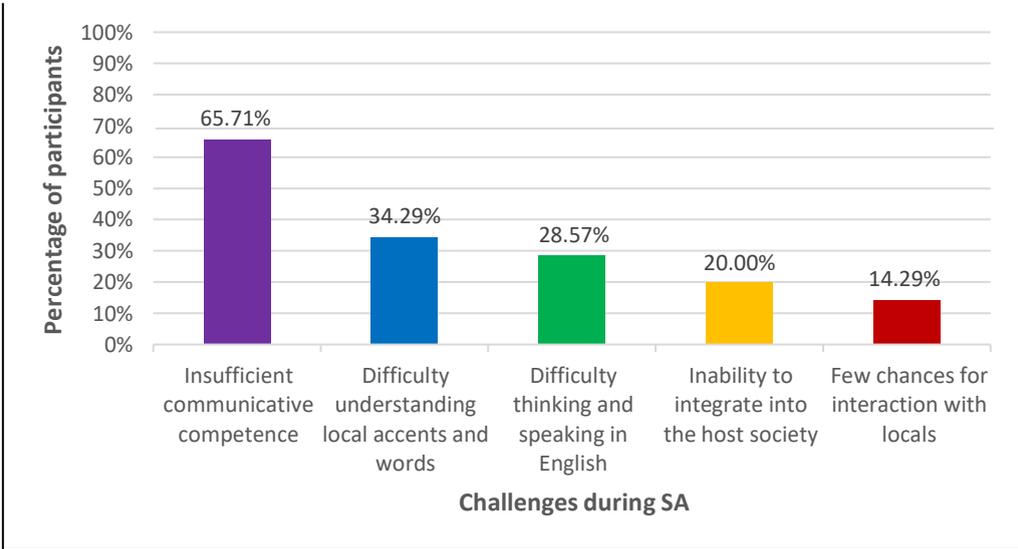

Fig. 2 Challenges That Had a Negative Effect on the Participants' SA Experience

The second research question in this study investigated how the participants exercised their agency to negotiate and construct their identities during SA. Data analysis of the interview and journal data revealed four major themes pertaining to the learners' identities. First, the results showed that the majority (80%) of the learners were fully aware of the strong connection between language,

culture, and identity. However, although they regarded the English language as being crucial to their future education and, in some cases, employment, they all commented that learning it did not mean assimilation to its cultural values or adopting its identity. In other words, the participants constructed their identity through difference, as illustrated in the following example from Ahlam's journal:

> I have majored in computer science, and I am truly fascinated by the advances in technology in the West. I really like the Western world, and English is a vehicle for me to expand my knowledge. However, I should clarify that I only learn from the West; I have not been absorbed into that culture (Ahlam, month 3 journal entry).

Likewise, when asked about how he would define his identity during SA, Saleh strongly expressed his pride in the unique characteristics of being Saudi Arabian:

> Although I am very interested in Western culture, my Saudi Arabian identity defines everything about me wherever I go in the world. Saudis are well-known for being honest, hard-working, generous, and welcoming people. We have a culture and traditions that go back hundreds of years. I wouldn't trade that for anything—no matter how great it is" (Saleh, mid-SA interview).

Remarkably, 45.71% of the participants reported not passively accepting identities ascribed to them by the host community (e.g., due to cultural homogeneity assumptions) if they did not align with their personalities. Rather, they actively negotiated those identities and pursued more powerful ones. For instance, in her eighth-month journal entry, Fatimah reported encountering constraints on her identity development as the locals misinterpreted her introversion as a lack of confidence and even depression. Fatimah explained how she resisted that negatively ascribed identity: "I am just as confident and intelligent as everybody else, so I often confront those individuals with my favorite Stephen Hawking quote—'The quietest people have the loudest minds.' I don't let anybody underestimate my personality." Likewise, Hashim stated in the post-SA interview that the locals misinterpreted his shyness and lack of initiative in communication as arrogance. However, he rejected the social exclusion and discrimination against him and tried to construct a more desirable identity by working on his communication and social skills.

Additionally, a significant percentage (40%) of the learners stated that although some differences existed between them and the host community, they never felt that they were marginalized or rejected by the local people. They actively interacted with the locals and maintained relationships with them in order to gain legitimate access to the CoP. Ali, for instance, seized the opportunity of living with a host family to immerse himself in the local culture and improve his spoken English. In his journal, Ali noted the following:

> My host family, especially the father, is very kind and supportive. They care about my English progress and always encourage me to converse with them, especially over meals. I have acquired a lot of formal and informal expressions from them and have started to use them already (Ali, month 10 journal entry).

Other participants, including Yasir, Hashim, Lubna, and Maha, also stated that having an extroverted personality contributed to their willingness to engage in social interactions with the locals. They all commented in their post-SA interviews that this positive experience helped them develop their language skills and gain more confidence.

Despite the positive experiences described above, low host receptivity was one of the biggest obstacles encountered by a few learners, which made them feel like "outsiders" with respect to the L2 community. When encountering socio-pragmatic breakdowns, 14.29% of the participants reported withdrawing from social settings and finding it difficult to develop relationships with the locals. For example, Khalid remarked that he was willing to engage in personal relationships with the locals, but his attempts were fruitless. Khalid's inability to express his real self and intellectual abilities when interacting with the locals was a constant struggle for him throughout his SA program. As he

commented in his fourth-month journal entry, "They treat me like a foreigner and, probably because of the language barrier, they think I'm just incompetent. I am really frustrated." Consequently, Khalid preferred to withdraw from interactions with the locals and to spend all his time with his international peers, as noted in his reflective journal entries. Although his English developed tremendously by the end of the program, Khalid still expressed a critical opinion of the L2 community in his last journal entry. Similarly, the issue of *otherness* (i.e., feeling different from the mainstream) caused Samira to prioritize the company of her Saudi peers and to consider her classes to be her "most powerful English learning resource" (Samira, mid-SA interview). She also reported focusing on learning activities that did not involve direct communication with the locals, such as reading and watching English TV channels. Fig. 3 demonstrates the four major ways in which the participants exercised their agency to negotiate and construct their identities during SA.
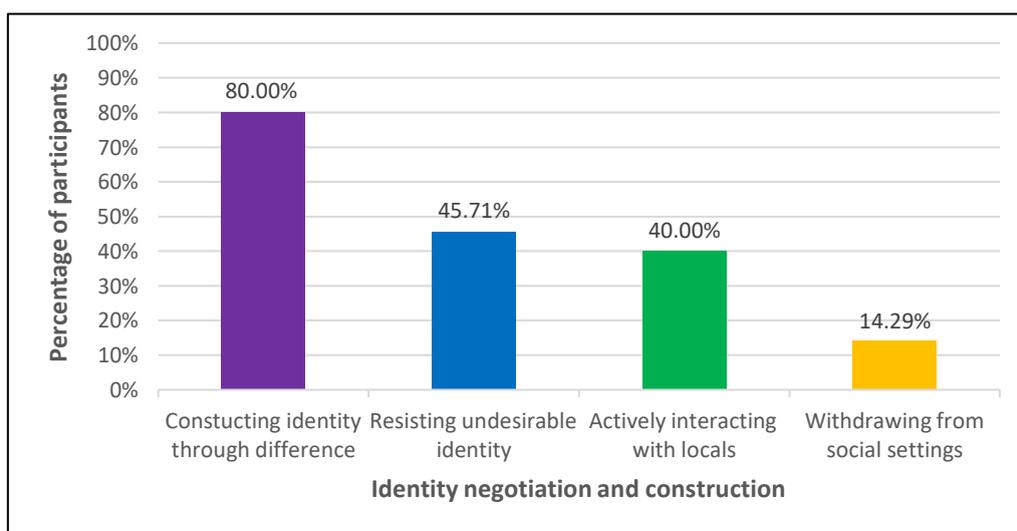

Fig. 3 Participants' Ways of Negotiating and Constructing Identity During SA

The third research question investigated the impact of the participants' identities on their learning outcomes. The findings reported above revealed that the experiences of the learners varied to some extent, which impacted the outcomes of their SA journey. First, the majority (80%) of the learners reported considerable improvement in their vocabulary knowledge as well as in the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. A similar percentage (77.14%) of the learners believed that they became more competent English speakers as a result of their constant interaction. Lastly, more than two-thirds (68.57%) of the participants stated that they progressively felt more confident in participating in various activities in the classroom and using English in different social settings outside class. The impact of the learners' SA experience on their learning outcomes is displayed in Fig. 4.
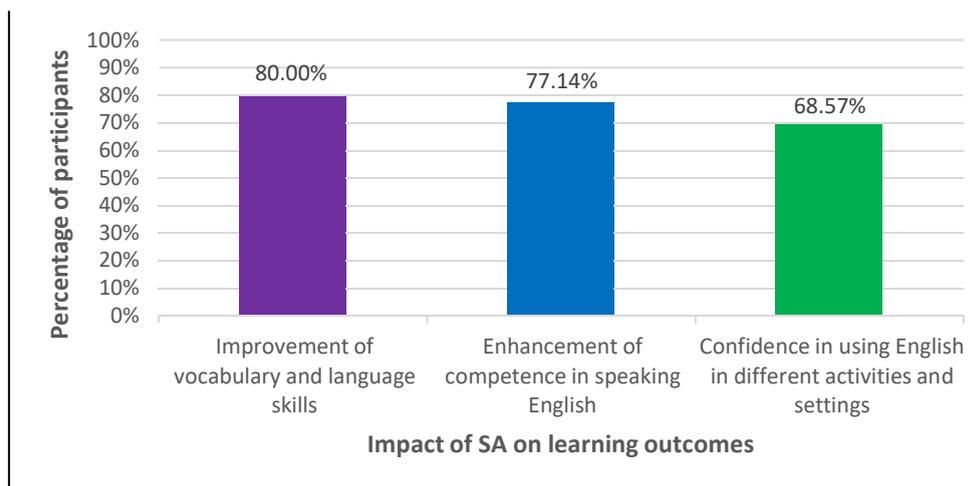
Fig. 4 Impact of Learners' SA Experience on Their Learning Outcomes

6. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study revealed that the learners engaged in activities indicated by previous SA research (e.g., Hsieh, 2006; Kim, 2014; Lee, 2014; Morita, 2004) to be useful for learning, such as interacting with peers and living with a host family. Their English teachers were also found to play a significant role in clarifying the key differences between their native culture and Western culture. It was observed that most of the learners preferred to position themselves in the global community as Saudi Arabians, with a strong sense of pride in their culture. Although they drew a distinction between English and Arabic cultures and languages, they did not regard them as opposites. Instead, they continually attempted to reconcile the differences between their Saudi Arabian and global identities. That helped to broaden the learners' horizons and, consequently, to develop their intercultural competence and to influence the way their L2 identity was constructed (Hermans & DiMaggio, 2007).

On the other hand, a few learners withdrew from interactions with the locals because such interactions made them feel apprehensive and incompetent at speaking English. These learners became less committed to pursuing opportunities to interact in English outside class. Although socialization theories generally assume that experts or locals provide a rich cultural and language-learning experience, such support may not always be obtainable. As Cervatiuc (2009, p. 255) pointed out, "native speakers (NS) are more likely to avoid interactions with non-native speakers (NNS) rather than provide them with input and help them negotiate meaning in the target language." This leads L2 learners to feel "marginalized, introverted, and sensitive to rejection" in the host community (Cervatiuc, 2009, p. 255). It also denies them the opportunities they need to develop their communicative competence and gain LPP in the CoP (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This provides evidence that learners' interaction has a mutual relationship with their sense of competence. The learners who failed to interact efficiently constructed an identity of less competent members of the community, which subsequently made interaction more challenging for them.

Furthermore, the findings of this research reveal that although the participants appeared to constitute a homogeneous group in terms of their linguistic and cultural background, they interacted and reacted differently in the host community. As previous research on L2 learner identity (e.g., Block, 2002; Gao, Li, & Li, 2002; Norton, 2000) has revealed, the participants' identities were observed not to be fixed psychological states manifested by either a positive or negative stance toward the target language and culture. Rather, they were found to become increasingly flexible through continual intercultural exposure.

As Norton (2000) pointed out, L2 learning is a complex process that involves shaping and reshaping learners' identities. Depending on the sociocultural context, the learners appeared to either negotiate their identities in order to gain access to the CoP or, conversely, to withdraw from it (Toohey & Norton, 2003). The participants who encountered locals who seemed to position them as the *foreign*

other and underestimated them as L2 speakers struggled to overcome this ascribed identity since it was forced upon them by more powerful members of the community—the native speakers (see Pugh, 2018). This identity hindered the learners' interaction and further marginalized them. This finding supports that of Rich and Troudi (2006) and provides evidence for Dolby's (2000) argument that identity is constructed within complex relations of power. Learners whose ascribed identities conflict with their desired identities prefer to refrain from interaction with the host community (Jackson, 2008).

Norton and Toohey (2001, p. 256) pointed out that good language learners "exercise human agency to negotiate their entry into the social networks so they can practice and improve their competence in the target language." In this study, a significant proportion of the participants seemed to be willing to establish meaningful relationships within the host community despite the various challenges they encountered. They apparently made agentive choices to navigate their way to fuller participation in the host community and, consequently, "appropriate more desirable identities" (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p. 414). This confirms the findings reported by Norris (2011), and it is also congruent with Norton's (2000) and Butler's (2004) arguments that unequal relations of power in the L2 community oblige novices (i.e., L2 learners) to seek out opportunities to interact with experts (i.e., native speakers).

As we can see, language is formulated "not only as a linguistic system, but as a social practice in which experiences are organized and identities negotiated" (Norton, 2010, p. 351). The findings of this research showed that the SA experience caused some learners to construct an intercultural identity, which allowed them to actively seek out opportunities to participate in the host community and improve their language-learning outcomes. This finding is congruent with those of previous studies (Giroir, 2014; Kim, 2014; Lee, 2014), and it also supports Weedon's (1997) argument that in order to succeed in language learning, L2 learners employ their agency to negotiate their status in the host community and gain a powerful rather than marginalized position.

Nonetheless, as Kinginger (2013) and Darvin and Norton (2016) pointed out, for a few learners, experiencing identity conflict and failure to construct desirable identities was a primary obstacle to their language development as they tended to withdraw from interactions with the host community. This finding is also noteworthy in that it lends support to Jackson's (2008, p. 240) argument that "the use of rich qualitative data provided insight into what actually happens during stays abroad and dispelled the myth that all sojourns automatically benefit from mere exposure to the host speech community."

7. CONCLUSION

The participants' experiences provide evidence that English learning is not only a process of developing language skills but also of negotiating and constructing identity. As Norton and Toohey (2001, p. 318) pointed out, it is necessary to examine "the ways in which learners exercise their agency in forming and reforming their identities" in the sociocultural learning context. This can help identify the factors that influence learners' interactions and, consequently, shed light on potential sources of learning difficulties. Effective management of one's identity in the L2 learning context is an integral part of intercultural competence. Furthermore, the individual differences identified among the learners when constructing their L2 identities provide evidence that homogeneity in linguistic and cultural backgrounds, as well as having a similar status in the host community, do not predict a similar trajectory of identity construction.

The findings of this research have several implications for future SA programs. First, mentors should familiarize L2 learners with the practice of identity reflection through interviews and journals. This can help raise awareness of their own identities and introduce them to the concept of multiple identities. Second, L2 teachers need to pay attention to their learners' feelings and listen to their voices. They should be aware of the significant role they should play in pointing out cultural differences to their students and highlighting the challenges they may encounter when interacting in the host community. Lastly, SA programs need to provide learners with adequate opportunities to communicate with native speakers, such as through language partner programs and volunteer work.

Finally, the available literature on SA language learning is still scarce, and further research is needed to explore the perspectives of short- and long-term learners from a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds and in different host communities. Understanding learners' identities and their impact on L2 gains can facilitate the development of SA programs that will nurture immediate and long-term language-learning success. Future studies may also choose to explore the viewpoints of native speakers who frequently interact with learners, such as host families and friends, in order to understand how they perceive as well as influence learners' identities and their related reactions.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Pre-SA Interview Questions
1. Warm-up question:
What expectations do you have about studying abroad?
Why do you feel that way?
2. What opportunities do you think will facilitate your experience?
3. What challenges do you think you will encounter?
4. What do you know about English people and their culture?
5. To what extent do you think your English will be enhanced?

Mid-SA Interview Questions
1. Warm-up question:
How do you feel about your study-abroad experience?
2. What opportunities have facilitated your experience?
3. What challenges have you encountered?
4. Describe the attitudes of native speakers when they interact with you.
What are your reactions to these attitudes?
5. Describe the attitudes of your non-native peers when they interact with you.
What are your reactions to these attitudes?
6. To what extent do you think your English has been enhanced thus far?

Post-SA Interview Questions
1. Warm-up question:
Has your study-abroad experience met your expectations?
Why do you (or don't you) think so?
2. What opportunities have facilitated your experience?
3. What challenges have you encountered?
4. Have you noticed any changes in the attitudes of native speakers towards you?
5. Have you noticed any changes in the attitudes of your non-native peers towards you?
6. To what extent has your English been enhanced as a result of studying abroad?

Appendix B: Monthly Reflective Journal Prompt

Think about a language or cultural learning experience that you had in the past month. Please describe it in as much detail as possible, including the following points:
• any opportunities that facilitated your learning;
• any challenges you faced in the learning process and how you tried to overcome them;
• your interactions with native speakers of English;
• your interactions with non-native speakers of English; and
• your perception of your English language progress to date.