



Article

Language and Social Identity among Iraqi University Students

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Abstract: This study looks at how language affects the social identity of Iraqi university students, with a focus on English as a way to express oneself and change oneself. Using social identity theory and Bourdieu's idea of linguistic capital, the study looks at 50 student essays that answer the question "How speaking English changes the way I see myself." The study uses qualitative discourse analysis to find common themes such as changing identities, empowerment vs. anxiety, the symbolic meanings of English, code-switching, and cultural conflict. The results show that English is more than just a way to talk to others; it also represents modernity, ambition, and belonging to the world. Students often connect English with personal progress and future goals, while simultaneously dealing with the conflicts between global identities and local customs. The study shows how complicated and frequently mixed identity building is in multilingual environments. It also argues for teaching methods that respect students' language differences and how they see themselves.

Keywords: Social Identity, Language and Identity, Cultural Conflict, Bilingualism in Education, Linguistic Capital

1. Introduction

Language is a significant factor in determining social identity. It does not only affect how people express themselves, but also how they are seen by others [1], [2]. In multilingual and multicultural contexts like Iraq, language operates as more than a tool of communication—it represents cultural tradition, affiliation, and social position. University students, who are considered as lively and educated members of society, navigate a complicated linguistic environment where language mirrors the personal identity, academic goals, and societal belonging [3], [4].

Iraq is notably linguistically diverse, beside the Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) which is considered the formal language in academic settings, there are; Local Arabic, Kurdish, Turkmen, and Assyrian dialects. This diversity allows students to frequently shift between

English and/or these languages and dialects, creating a complex sociolinguistic context in expressing identity [5]. "While MSA holds institutional legitimacy in educational spaces, students strategically navigate linguistic markets by alternating between vernacular Arabic, English, and minority languages." Bourdieu, P. Consequently, choosing these languages both inside and outside of academic life, reflects diverse social identities and integrates with different social groups [6], [7], [8].

Research in Sociolinguistics has extensively signaled language's essential role in reshaping social identity. Far from being a neutral medium, language is saturated with

Citation: Swear, M. A. Language and Social Identity among Iraqi University Students. Central Asian Journal of Literature, Philosophy, and Culture 2025, 6(3), 518-524.

Received: 22nd Jun 2025

Revised: 29th Jun 2025

Accepted: 20th Jul 2025

Published: 31st Jul 2025



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symbolic power, serving as a tool. where social hierarchies are either supported or challenged Empirical studies on linguistic variation demonstrate how dialects and multilingual performs function as indicators of “in-group solidarity” or resistance to dominant language ideas. In multilingual settings, people purposefully select languages to convey particular sides of their identities. For instance, speaking Kurdish or Assyrian conveys cultural and political identities, while alternating between Baghdadi, Southern and Mosuli dialects may indicate regional affiliation.

Historically, the linguistic context of Iraq has been deeply shaped by historical processes of state formation and colonial control [9], [10]. The Ottoman Empire (1534–1918) strengthened administrative hierarchies through Turkish-Arabic language use. Hence, the dominating of Turkish marked Arabic local identity. Additionally, British colonial rule privileging English in military and administrative contexts while marginalizing Kurdish and other minority languages. Arabic was endorsed at the expense of minority languages as a uniting national language; English became associated with superior status and education while Kurdish and other minority languages were limited the public and institutional presence and considered as informal.

This study, based on sociolinguistic theory and identity studies, seeks to investigate how Iraqi university students use language as a resource for identity building. Through discourse analysis, it investigates how linguistic behaviors—such as code-switching and attitudes toward learning another language reflects broader societal realities. The study aims to offer insight on how Iraqi university’s students utilize language to manage their multiple identities across academic and sociocultural domains [11].

2. Materials and Methods

This study uses a qualitative, discourse-analytic approach based on sociolinguistic and social identity theory frameworks to look at how Iraqi university students use language to build and negotiate parts of their social identity. A big part of this study is looking at 50 written papers that college students turned in on the subject "How Speaking English Changes the Way, I See Myself."

Based on social identity theory, the current study investigates how Iraqi university students use language to negotiate identity. According to social identity theory, group membership is what gives people a sense of self, which has historically been expressed through language. Similarly, Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital illustrates how language use is related to power and social status structures. In Iraq, where politics, history, and culture intersect, language is a powerful instrument for students to express and manage their identities.

This study uses a qualitative, discourse-analytic approach based on sociolinguistic and social identity theory frameworks to investigate how Iraqi university students use language to develop and negotiate aspects of their social identities. This study focuses on examining 50 written essays written by undergraduate students on the topic "How Speaking English Changes the Way, I See Myself." In order to closely examine language use in expressing identity in students' reflective writing, the research approach focuses on textual discourse analysis. The study examines how students perceive their experiences with English and how these experiences impact their sense of self and social connection by concentrating on personal narratives.

Using a qualitative, discourse-analytic approach grounded in sociolinguistic and social identity theory frameworks, this study investigates how Iraqi university students use language to construct and negotiate aspects of their social identities. This study examines 50 undergraduate students' writings on the topic of "How Speaking English Changes the Way, I See Myself." The main focus of the study technique is textual discourse analysis, which aims to precisely examine how language is used in students' reflective writing to form their identities. The study examines how and why students perceive their

English education, as well as how the education impacts their identity and social interactions, by analyzing personal testimonies.

Through a research methodology grounded in textual discourse analysis, in-depth scrutiny of the deployment of identity markers by students in reflective writing is facilitated. The historical of students' English language use and how these influence their self-concept and interpersonal relations are explained by the research, with special attention to personal narrative. The data are fifty essays completed by Al-Farahidi University undergraduate EFL students in Baghdad. The students, with their various academic and socioeconomic backgrounds, provide the full range of views. The essays were chosen on the basis of language variety, depth of introspection, and appropriateness of topic.

The essays were collected with the students' informed consent for research use. Each text provides a self-narrated perspective on language, identity, and personal transformation. No identifying information was retained in the final dataset to preserve student anonymity. Students were informed that their essays could be used anonymously for academic research, and all identifying details were removed from the dataset. Ethical clearance was obtained from the university's research ethics committee.

Data Analysis

The collected texts were subjected to qualitative discourse analysis, focusing on:

- Themes of identity transformation: How students describe changes in self-perception through English learning or use.
- Code-switching: Instances where students shift between English and Arabic (or mention doing so), and what these shifts signify.
- Lexical choices and metaphor: How students linguistically frame the experience of speaking English (e.g., through metaphors of "seeing," "becoming," "transforming").
- Markers of group affiliation or distancing: Language indicating feelings of belonging, alienation, empowerment, or cultural tension.

Coding was done inductively to allow themes to emerge from the data, guided by key concepts from social identity theory and Bourdieu's idea of linguistic capital.

Analytical Framework for Student Essay Analysis

The following table outlines the most important items used in analyzing student essays on the topic 'How Speaking English Changes the Way, I See Myself'. These categories guide the discourse analysis and help identify linguistic patterns, identity themes, and sociocultural meanings, see Table 1.

Table 1. Analytical Framework for Discourse Analysis of Student Essays on English and Identity.

Analytical Item	Definition	Example from Student Text
Identity Transformation	How students describe changes in their self-perception due to English use	"When I speak English, I feel more confident and open to new ideas."
Code-Switching	Shifting between languages in writing or speech, and what it signifies	"I speak Arabic at home, but I prefer English in class presentations."

Lexical Choices	Word selection that reflects identity, tone, or attitude	Using words like “global,” “modern,” “educated” to describe the self in English-speaking contexts
Metaphorical Language	Use of figurative speech to express internal experiences	“English opened a new door in my life.”
Group Affiliation	References to social belonging or exclusion based on language	“When I use English, I feel I belong to an international community.”
Distancing or Conflict	Expressions of tension between languages or cultural values	“Sometimes I feel I’m losing part of my culture because I think more in English.”
Empowerment vs. Anxiety	Whether English is seen as liberating or stressful	“I feel proud when I speak English fluently” vs. “I’m afraid my Arabic is becoming weaker.”
Symbolic Meaning of English	How English is symbolized (e.g., success, modernity, pressure)	“English is the language of success and travel for me.”
Language and Future Self	Descriptions of how English influences students’ dreams and aspirations	“I imagine myself working in a global company where English is the main language.”

3. Results and Discussion

This section provides the qualitative analysis of 50 student essays on the topic 'How Speaking English Changes the Way, I See Myself'. The data were examined using a thematic discourse analysis approach, which was based on the previously defined framework. The study reveals various repeating themes including language, identity, social belonging, and future goals. In reference to identity Transformation, when speaking English, all 50 students claimed self-perception changed. Many of them regarded themselves as being more confident, openminded, and capable [12]. Common phrases were "I feel smarter in English," and "English makes me feel like a professional." Several storylines stressed a new kind of self-emergence through English, which is frequently connected with modernity and aspiration.

Regarding Anxiety and Empowerment, forty-two of the students considered English as empowering because it allowed them express themselves freely, feel independent and easily access knowledge. Eight students, however, reported unease or anxiety of losing contact with their cultural identity. For example, one of the students said, "English gives

me power, but it scares me when I forget how to say something in Arabic." This suggests that language functioning dually either as a means of empowerment or generating cultural conflict. Concerning the symbolic meaning of English forty-six of the students symbolized English as an entrance to success and future opportunities. It was connected with their dreams of opportunity, travel, education, and technology. They kept saying "English is the language of dreams" and "It's the key to my future." English was frequently seen as a distinguished symbol that connected students to global network and contemporary lives [13], [14].

Thirty-four students reported deliberate code-switching. They indicated utilizing English in academic and online settings and Arabic in emotional and personal situations. Some of them claimed that changing languages based on the topic or audience. It is clear that students exhibit strategic self-representation and intercultural adaptability in academic association.

Regarding group affiliation and belonging, twenty-eight of the students reported that, especially in academic or online contexts, English helped them feel more connected to their international friends. Others talked about separating from their elder or local communities.

One of the students said "My friends and I talk in English because it feels different."

Twenty -three students expressed their relationship to English in metaphors. Expressions such as "a bridge to my dreams," "a light in the darkness," or "a second skin" illustrate the symbolic and emotional potential of language in reformulating one's identity. Forty-eight students connected English with their goals, aspirations, and future employment. Typical goals included studying overseas, working for multinational companies, and pursuing careers as IT specialists, ambassadors, or obtaining higher degrees [15]. In addition to being a skill, English was viewed as a transformative tool that provided access to global opportunities, social mobility, and personal development. Seventeen students reported that they are experiencing mental distress, because of their worries to manage challenges in their social and academic environment. This distress might be an important factor that hinder learning other language, see Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of Thematic Patterns.

Theme	Frequency (out of 50 students)
Identity Transformation	50
Empowerment vs. Anxiety	42 positive, 8 conflicted
Symbolic Meaning of English	46
Code-Switching and Identity Negotiation	34
Group Affiliation and Belonging	28
Language and Future Aspirations	48
Cultural and Emotional Conflict	17
Metaphorical Language Use	23

As the results of this study demonstrate, the role of language is very essential in the construction and negotiation of social identity among Iraqi university students. The data show, English is not only a tool of communication but a symbolic and transformative power in the students' life, shaping how they think about themselves, their relationship with other, and their future.

The concept of identity transformation was still widely recognized. The students' writing depicts English as a tool for self-reinvention in accordance with Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory, which maintains that people create their identities by belonging to particular groups. These students gained access to new social groups with a variety of self-

concepts and value systems, including professional, global, and intellectual ones, English provides additional social and economic prospects as language capital.

Nonetheless, the uncertainty expressed by several students—most notably, the fear of losing touch with Arabic or traditional values—reflects tensions between modernity and cultural continuousness. Such tensions include what Bhabha calls the "third space" of identity: a negotiating space in which individuals mediate between received cultural constructions and emerging global influences. Students' use of metaphorical language to describe English as a "bridge" or "second skin" suggests that they are not substituting one identity for another, but rather creating hybrid identities that combine various linguistic and cultural factors.

Code switching becomes a purposeful and meaningful activity. Students use it not only to navigate various communication circumstances, but also to express their unique selves. This supports Gumperz's theory of code-switching as a cue for contextualization, as well as findings from multilingual identity research that

Pennycook found that students associate English with successful global citizenship and empowerment, reflecting the language's social-political function in the postcolonial and global era. Some essays show intercultural and emotional tension, which may indicate linguistic anxiety. While English can be beneficial, it can also underestimate local languages and identities if not properly integrated into educational and cultural contexts. Notably, students' future plans, often stated in English, reflect a future-oriented identity formation. Kanno and Norton define language as a tool for imagining and creating future selves, or "imagined communities" that learners want to join.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that Iraqi university students develop their identities through several language choices. English is a living language that is used for personal and social purposes, rather than just being learned. The study suggests that language acquisition should be viewed as an identity project, with educational forms taking into account students' languages, cultures, and aspirations.

4. Conclusion

The findings might not apply to all Iraqi university students because the source data was taken from a particular institution. Nonetheless, this study's data is especially rich in insights that shape language related to self-experience and self-concept, which guide the deconstructing of more general identity processes in the context of EFL. This study has illustrated how language affects Iraqi university students' social identities. An analysis of the fifty reflective essays showed that English is more than just a tool for academic study; it is a symbol of change, possibility, and optimism. Students talked about how their perspectives on the world have changed, how new identities have emerged, and how difficult it is to preserve one's culture while embracing a global language.

The majority of the students were able to imagine and build new social roles through English, which boosted their confidence and sense of belonging to global societies. Nonetheless, emotional and cultural awareness of some students highlight the need for inclusive and compassionate language policies that reflect the multilingualism of Iraqi society. The results highlight the diversity of identity building in EFL setting, and the need to appreciate student's linguistic life in social and academic settings.

Finally, the study recommended that teachers should use active identity-based reflection projects that allow students to analyze their linguistic identities in order to foster identity aware inclusivity in the field of language instruction. Cultural sensitivity is further enhanced by cultivating multilingual understanding for students' languages, especially minority or regional languages. To lessen linguistic insecurity, educational institutions should encourage students to utilize English appropriately in addition to their home tongues. The sociolinguistic aspects of identity that influence practitioners should be covered in sufficient teacher preparation programs. It should be acknowledged that multilingualism is a type of identity performance that kids easily interact with online. The

interaction of region, gender, and identity with regard to language requires further investigation among Iraqi colleges.

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