

LEARNER IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION OF CHINESE AS A FOREIGN OR SECOND LANGUAGE (CFL/CSL): A NARRATIVE INQUIRY

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Abstract: This study examines how learners of Chinese as a foreign or second language (CFL/CSL) construct and negotiate their identities within the socio-cultural context of China. Using a qualitative research design, data were collected through written narratives and semi-structured interviews with international university students studying Chinese in China. The analysis focused on key themes such as linguistic self-confidence, cultural adaptation, and bilingual identity, with a word cloud employed as a supplementary analytical tool. The findings indicate that most participants recognized a close relationship between language learning and identity formation, acknowledging the influence of Chinese language learning on their linguistic and cultural selves. However, some learners viewed CFL learning primarily as foreign language acquisition rather than identity development. These results highlight the diversity and complexity of identity construction among CFL/CSL learners in a target-language environment. The study contributes to learner identity research and offers pedagogical implications for supporting learners' linguistic and cultural development in academic and social contexts in China.

Keywords: Social Identity Theory; Learner Identity; Chinese as a Foreign or Second Language (CFL/CSL); Narrative Inquiry

1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, alongside the growing emphasis on the socio-cultural dimensions of education, researchers and professionals in the field of language learning have increasingly highlighted the importance of learners' identities in promoting a needs-responsive approach to learning. As Belcher and Lukkarila argue, the scope of needs analysis should be broadened to consider "not just what learners want to be able to do in a language but also who they want to become through language" [1]. This perspective foregrounds identity as a central component of language learning rather than a peripheral outcome.

According to Social Identity Theory, an individual's identity and self-image are shaped through affiliation with and participation in particular social groups or communities. Such groups provide individuals with a sense of belonging and orientation within the social world [2]. Social categories function as self-referential frameworks that enable individuals to conceptualize their roles within society [3]. Over the past few decades, identity research has expanded considerably across a range of disciplines, reflecting a growing recognition of identity as a dynamic and socially constructed phenomenon [4-5].

Within applied linguistics, the relationship between language and identity has been widely examined, particularly in multilingual and multicultural contexts [6-11]. These studies emphasize that language learning extends beyond cognitive processes to include social participation, positioning, and negotiation of self. While foreign or second language learning is influenced by multiple interrelated factors, including motivation, affect, cognition, and interaction [12]. Identity plays a mediating role in shaping learners' engagement with the target language and its speakers.

From psychological and pedagogical perspectives, foreign language learning has been conceptualized as a sociocultural phenomenon that brings about changes in learners' cognitive and psychological development [13-17]. Learning an additional language has been shown to broaden learners' perspectives, enhance communicative competence, and foster greater cultural awareness and tolerance, further underscoring the close relationship between language learning and identity construction [13].

Despite extensive research on learner identity in ESL and EFL contexts, comparatively limited attention has been paid to learners of Chinese as a foreign or second language (CFL/CSL), particularly within the target-language environment of China. To address this gap, the present study investigates how international university students learning Chinese perceive the role of the Chinese language and culture in their identity construction. Drawing on Social Identity Theory, the study explores learners' narratives to examine how engagement with the Chinese language and sociocultural context shapes their evolving linguistic and cultural identities.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social Identity Theory (SIT), originally developed by Tajfel and Turner, is a social psychological framework that explains how individuals construct their self-concept through membership in social groups and participation in social contexts [2]. The theory emphasizes that identity is socially constructed through the process of social categorization,

social identification, and social comparison. Through these processes, individuals develop a sense of belonging and position themselves in relation to others within specific social groups. Identity plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' self-understanding, interpersonal relationships, and patterns of participation. Identity matters because it shapes how individuals make sense of their experiences, including their engagement with learning and texts [18-19]. Learning is therefore inherently social, as it is influenced by how individuals perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others within particular communities.

In the field of language learning, Social Identity Theory provides a useful lens for understanding how learners negotiate their identities as members of linguistic and cultural groups. Language learning extends beyond the acquisition of linguistic knowledge and involves participation in social practices associated with the target language. Learners' beliefs about themselves, their willingness to engage, invest, and persist in language learning. Applying Social Identity Theory to the context of Chinese as a foreign or second language (CFL/CSL) allows for an examination of how learners construct and negotiate their identities within the sociocultural environment of China. As CFL/CSL learners interact with the Chinese language and culture, they encounter new social categories and group affiliations that shape their linguistic and cultural identities. This framework, therefore, supports an explanation of how identity construction mediates learners' language learning experience and their opportunities for academic and personal development in the target-language context.

3 LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Identity: Definitions and Characteristics

Identity has traditionally been understood as a constellation of characteristics, beliefs, experiences, and values through which individuals define themselves [20]. It reflects how people perceive themselves in relation to others and within the sociocultural environments they inhabit [21]. Spencer-Oatey conceptualizes identity as an individual's self-image, comprising multiple positively, neutrally, and negatively evaluated attributes [22]. Identity provides coherence between beliefs, values, and goals, and supports individuals' capacity to project themselves into the future. Importantly, identity is embedded within sociocultural contexts, and changes in these contexts can reshape how individuals define themselves. The relationship between language learning and identity has been a central concern in applied linguistics. According to Norton, language learners are engaged in an ongoing process of identity construction whenever they communicate [23]. Identity research has since expanded to include multiple dimensions such as social, cultural, and ethnic identity, reflecting the complex and dynamic nature of identity formation. From a poststructuralist perspective, identity is viewed as fluid, context-dependent, and shaped through social interaction rather than as a fixed personal trait [24-25]. Constructivist approaches further emphasize the relationship between identity and the social world, highlighting how learners' identities are continuously negotiated through participation in social practices. Research examining identity reconstruction through target language learning thus offers valuable insights into how learners acquire not only linguistic competence but also new ways of positioning themselves in the world.

3.1.1 Personal identity

Personal identity refers to individuals' sense of uniqueness and their perception of themselves as distinct from others [26]. Within identity theory, personal identity represents the most basic level of self-categorization and serves as a fundamental motivator of human behavior [27-28]. Although personal identity emphasizes individuality, it is inherently social, as individuals' self-perceptions are shaped by their roles and interactions within society [29]. Personal identity also interacts with group identity. As Deaux noted, individuals' emotions, beliefs, and ideals contribute to the formation of group identities, indicating that personal and social identities are mutually reinforcing [30]. In language learning contexts, personal identity influences learners' motivations, attitudes, and engagement, shaping how they respond to opportunities for participation and interaction in the target language.

3.1.2 CFL learner identity

CFL learner identity refers to the identity constructed by learners within the context of learning Chinese as a foreign language. For university-level learners, CFL identity encompasses beliefs, values, and commitments associated with studying Chinese and positioning oneself as a legitimate language learner. This identity is reflected in learners' attitudes, learning behaviors, and evolving self-perceptions as users of the Chinese language. From a sociocultural perspective, language learning is embedded in participation in social activities and interactions with others, objects, and events [31]. Learning a language is thus both a linguistic and social process, through which learners negotiate meaning and construct identities in relation to others [32-34]. CFL learners' identities are dynamic and continuously shaped by their experiences, opportunities for interaction, and engagement with the target language community. Research suggests that learner identity influences learners' needs, desires, and access to opportunities for using the target language [35]. In CFL contexts, identity plays a crucial role in shaping learners' willingness to participate, their investment in learning, and their ability to benefit from linguistic input. Consequently, understanding CFL learner identity is essential for supporting effective language learning and meaningful engagement.

3.1.3 CSL learner identity

Research on second language learning has consistently emphasized the close relationship between language learning and identity construction. Scholars have examined how learners negotiate and sometimes resist the social positions made available to them within specific sociocultural contexts [36-37]. Block believed that poststructuralist approaches are particularly valuable for investigating second language learner identity, as they allow researchers to examine the

complex social dimensions of language learning beyond linguistic competence [7]. Learning a second language has been conceptualized as a process of identity formation that shapes who learners are and what they can become [11]. For adult learners, second language learning often occurs after their identities have been largely established within their native sociocultural contexts, making identity negotiation particularly salient [38]. Studies in second language learning have demonstrated that language use and communication play a central role in the reconstruction of learners' identities, influenced by personal histories and cultural backgrounds.

3.2 The Present Study

This study seeks to address this gap by exploring how CFL/CSL learners perceive the role of Chinese language learning in shaping their identities. By adopting a sociocultural and identity-oriented perspective, the study aims to contribute to both theoretical discussions and pedagogical practices in CFL/CSL education.

4 METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore how learners of Chinese as a foreign or second language (CFL/CSL) construct and negotiate their identities through language learning experiences. Qualitative methods are well-suited to examining learners' perceptions, meanings, and lived experiences, which cannot be captured through numerical data alone. Narrative inquiry was selected as it enables participants to organize experiences into meaningful stories, offering insight into identity construction processes. As Patton notes, qualitative inquiry allows researchers to understand how individuals interpret their experiences and the significance these experiences hold for them [39]. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were conducted to further explore themes emerging from the narratives and to allow participants to elaborate on their experiences in their own words while maintaining focus on the research questions.

4.2 Research Context and Participants

The study was conducted at one of the universities of China, a public research university located in Xi'an, China. This university offers Chinese language courses for international students across undergraduate, master's, and doctoral programs, providing sustained exposure to Mandarin Chinese and Chinese culture.

As shown in table 1, seven international students (including the researcher) participated in the study. Participants were aged between 23 and 28 and had two to three years of experience learning Chinese. In terms of ethnic as well as linguistic background, the participants constituted Turkmen, Uzbek, Central - Southern - East Africans and Columbian. Their experience of using Chinese was almost entirely related to their education. Participation was voluntary, no remuneration was provided, and pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

Table 1 Profiles of the Participants

Participants	Gender	Nationality	CL Study Years
NO	M	Cameron	2,5
RE	F	Turkmenistan	3
MA	F	Columbia	3
SA	F	Uzbekistan	2,5
ME	M	Zambia	3
PA	F	Uganda	3
EA	F	Turkmenistan	3

4.3 Data Collection Instruments

4.3.1 Written narratives

Written narratives constituted the primary data source. Following Pavlenko and Lantolf, learner narratives were used to explore identity construction processes that may not be evident through observation alone [40]. Participants responded in English to two open-ended prompts concerning the influence of learning Chinese on their sense of self and their present and future life orientations. No word limit was imposed to encourage reflective and authentic responses. These narratives served as the basis for identifying preliminary themes and informing the interview questions. Analysis of the written narratives further supported the interview findings and revealed two main thematic patterns:

1) *Has the studying of the Chinese language as a Foreign or Second language, CFL/CSL, influenced the sense of who you are? If yes/no, how and why?*

2) *How has the knowledge of Chinese influenced your style of living, your activities in the present, and your prospects for the future?*

4.3.2 Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to deepen the understanding of issues raised in the narratives. Interviews consisted of three open-ended questions addressing learners' definitions of identity, perceptions of CFL/CSL learning, and views on identity reconstruction through language learning. Interviews were conducted in English, lasted between

one and one and a half hours, and were audio-recorded with participants' consent, then transcribed verbatim. The semi-structured interviews addressed three main areas:

(1) *What defines your identity as a learner of CFL?*

(2) *How do learning and using the Chinese language as a foreign language influence your CFL/CSL learners' identity construction?*

(3) *How did you perceive your CFL/CSL learner identity?*

4.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Written narratives and interview transcripts were compiled into individual case files and repeatedly read to identify recurring patterns, concepts, and meanings [41]. Coding was conducted both manually and with the support of MAXQDA qualitative analysis software to enhance analytical rigor. Related codes were grouped into six major themes: ability to communicate, job opportunities, cultural awareness, personal growth, behavioral change, and the development of new habits and routines. These themes provided insight into how CFL/CSL learners perceive identity construction through Chinese language learning.

5 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

5.1 Findings

The analysis of written narratives and semi-structured interviews revealed mixed perspectives regarding the influence of learning Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) on learners' identities. Of the seven participants, five reported that learning Chinese had influenced their sense of self and identity construction, while two participants perceived Chinese primarily as a communicative tool and reported no direct impact on their identity. Nevertheless, even those who rejected explicit identity change acknowledged that learning Chinese expanded their opportunities for communication, social interaction, and prospects.

5.2 Qualitative Analyses of Semi-Structured Interviews

The semi-structured interviews were threefold: first, to investigate how learners of the Chinese language perceive and define identity; second, to evaluate the participants' understanding of the possible impact of learning CFL on their identity; and third, to investigate how the participants' experiences of the possibility of such an impact, as well as the main factors that influence it.

5.2.1 Define CFL identity

The semi-structured interview analysis transcripts and others reveal that students define their CFL learner identity as a positive and strong self of personality. It also shows that learning CFL influenced their identity, and they can define their identity as a CFL learner.

Mastery of a difficult language like Chinese boosted my self-confidence and provided a sense of accomplishment, which contributed to a positive self-image and a stronger sense of personal identity. (SK)

5.2.2 Influence of CFL learning on identity construction

The following is what the investigation revealed: of the total seven students, five held that learning the Chinese language as a foreign language has impacted their identity. However, two participants resisted identity construction through learning the Chinese language as a CFL; they believe that there is no connection between learning a language and identity construction.

No, it didn't. I think there's no connection between learning a language and identity construction. (PA)

These quotes indicate that language learning and identity construction are complex topics. This also shows that there is a relationship between language learning and identity construction, but it cannot impact all learners' identities.

5.2.3 Attitudes toward CFL learner identity

Participants who perceived identity change generally evaluated their CFL learner identity positively. They associated it with personal development, improved communication skills, and enhanced social and professional opportunities. Learning Chinese was described as empowering, particularly in facilitating friendships with Chinese speakers and enabling engagement in travel, business, and cultural activities.

I feel more positive toward it. Since I first began studying the Chinese language, I've noticed a number of positive shifts that have taken place. (ME)

5.3 Qualitative Analysis of Written Narratives

5.3.1 Factor 1: CFL influence on learners' identity construction

As shown in Table 2, most of the participants are aware of their identity construction through the CFL learning. The students' perspectives of their identities in relation to learning and using a foreign language can be explored from the points of view of social interaction, cultural understanding, and personal development. They declare that by learning CFL and experiencing its culture, they become more receptive and tolerant of otherness and difference, as well as more intelligent. In addition, their confidence increases when they converse in a new language. As a result, they can cope

with new and challenging situations. The participants of the study believe that learning a foreign language provides them access to knowledge and other non-material resources, as well as new opportunities.

Table 2 Statements Agreed with by Participants Included in Factor 1

<i>Participant 1:</i> It influenced my personal growth.
<i>Participant 2:</i> I felt like I was reorganizing my identity.
<i>Participant 3:</i> Before, I was more direct, but now, I am trying to be more polite; this is also one of the influences.
<i>Participant 4:</i> It caused me to listen to Chinese songs, watch Chinese films and series...
<i>Participant 5:</i> I must admit that without learning Chinese, I would not be the person that I am now.

The results are also consistent with previous research demonstrating the crucial role of linguistic, social, and cultural contexts in the formation of new identities, especially in SLA/FLL and the personal identity of language learners [42-43]. According to Norton, the learners of a language, the situation in which they are learning that language, and social interaction all play a role in the creation of the learners' identities [10].

5.3.2 Factor 2: CFL does not influence students' identity construction

Table 3 revealed that two participants declared that learning the Chinese language as a CFL didn't influence their identity; rather, it was a communication tool. However, for them, Chinese learning as a foreign language was not only about acquiring a new language, but also about culture-related interests. It is quite intriguing that NO and PA claim that learning and using Chinese has not affected their sense of self. As evidenced by the excerpts from their texts, they recognize that their knowledge of Chinese enables them to engage in numerous activities that would be impossible without it. They can watch films in Chinese, communicate in Chinese, study Chinese, read Chinese-language texts, and have guaranteed job prospects. Nonetheless, they do not believe that their identity has been affected by their knowledge of Chinese.

Table 3 Statements Disagreed with by Participants Included in Factor 1

<i>Participant 6:</i> There's no connection between language learning and identity construction. I am not sociable, so it's difficult to get along with others.
<i>Participant 7:</i> Language is a communication tool for me; it was a plus to understand Chinese culture.

It is noteworthy that, doctoral student, NO older than the other participants, most experienced, qualified, and studied in various places, is more reflective. This student has a belief that he has already completed his identity construction, and learning a new foreign language cannot impact his identity. However, he acknowledges that knowledge of Chinese allowed him to perceive life from a variety of angles and to find a position in society.

5.4 Generating the Word Clouds to Visualize the Semi-Structured and Written Narratives Data

To supplement the qualitative analysis, a word cloud was generated from the combined semi-structured interview transcripts and written narratives. This resulted in the word cloud shown in Figure 1. Frequently occurring words related to the research prompts (e.g., Chinese, language, identity) were excluded to enhance interpretive clarity. Prominent terms included phrases such as *personal growth*, *open-minded*, *polite*, and *lifestyle*, reflecting participants' emphasis on behavioral change, cultural awareness, and self-development. Consistent with previous research on visual analytic tools [44-45], the word cloud provided an immediate visual representation of dominant ideas emerging from the data. Although word clouds may oversimplify contextual meanings, their use in this study supported thematic interpretation and reinforced findings derived from narrative and interview analysis.

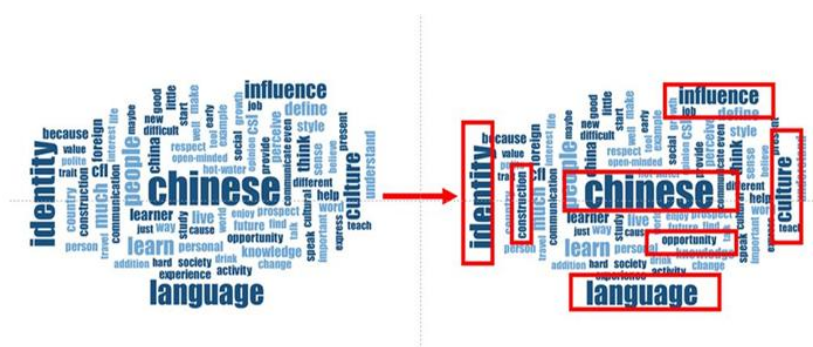


Figure 1 Word Cloud Generated from all Participants' Combined Semi-Structured Interviews Transcripts and Written Narratives

The use of the word cloud was primarily chosen as a technique to visually depict and synthesize significant ideas from the participants' responses, to have a better understanding of their learning experiences with CFL and how it has

influenced their identities. The creation and exploration of various word clouds using a word cloud application from the viewpoint of a researcher seems to have the potential to enhance data analysis and discoveries, depending on how the method is applied. This corroborates the findings of other researchers who have investigated the use of word clouds to facilitate data analysis [44,45-46].

5.5 Discussion

The findings indicate that learning Chinese as a foreign language can play a significant role in learners' identity construction, particularly by fostering personal growth, cultural awareness, and social engagement. Most participants demonstrated an awareness of the relationship between language learning and identity, supporting prior research in SLA and identity studies [10,12].

Participants who reported identity change emphasized the importance of social interaction and communication with Chinese speakers. Through language use, learners gained access to cultural and symbolic capital, enabling them to position themselves more confidently within both local and global contexts. These findings align with Norton's assertion that language learning involves investment in social identity and imagined futures. At the same time, the resistance expressed by some participants highlights that identity construction through language learning is not uniform. Learners who viewed identity as fixed were less likely to interpret language learning as transformative, even when acknowledging its practical benefits. This supports poststructuralist perspectives that identity is negotiated differently depending on individual histories and beliefs [7].

Overall, the study suggests that CFL learning influences not only linguistic competence but also learners' perceptions of themselves and their place in the world. Even when learners deny identity change, their narratives reveal shifts in attitudes, behaviors, and opportunities associated with language learning. These findings underscore the value of adopting a sociocultural perspective in CFL/CSL education and highlight the need for pedagogical practices that acknowledge learners' multiple and evolving identities.

6 CONCLUSION

This study mainly explored the influence of learning the Chinese language as a foreign or second language on identity construction of international students at one of the universities of China, and the possible reasons for the formation of their identity were analysed by using qualitative data analysis and a semi-structured interview as the main instruments. According to our findings, the processes of identity formation and language acquisition are interconnected. Language is not only a communication tool, but also an instrument for expressing and negotiating identity. Whenever they interact in a foreign or second language, language learners construct and negotiate their identities. However, the relationship between language learning and identity construction is a complex topic. While language learning can be a site for identity construction and negotiation, not all language learning experiences necessarily lead to identity construction.

Supporting linguistic and cultural identity development. The findings of the study highlight the intricate connections between language learning and identity construction. Educators and policymakers can use these insights to better support CFL/CSL learners in developing their linguistic and cultural identities, fostering a sense of belonging and confidence in their language abilities.

Although much has been accomplished, there is still a substantial amount of research that needs to be done. First, provide interesting research questions to know more about students' CFL identity. Secondly, involve more participants and create a larger data analysis. Finally, the findings should be supported by rich and triangulated data.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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